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Duality

by LadyStarwing

Summary

[Co-written with friend Magnus Ragnar] When the prince of Ylisse stumbles across a pair of siblings arguing over a map, nobody knew just what their meeting would lead to ...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Footsteps of Fate

"Where does THIS bloody map lead to!?"

"For the fifth time, Solna, I don't know; stop jerking around so much! Your back is bleeding heavily."

The sound of voices reached the blue-haired male's ear from across the field, making him come up short while walking. It had sounded like a couple of people were nearby, but the fields around the Southtown weren't exactly an easy place to wind up lost in. His pause was noticed by his companions – a blonde girl in a yellow dress and a large man in knight armor over a suit – and they stopped to look at him as well. "Chrom?" The girl asked, making the blue-haired male turn to her. "Is something up?"

"Did either of you two hear that?" Chrom asked, worry creasing his brow a fraction. When they both shook their heads, he frowned. "That's surprising, Lissa; I thought you would have picked it up. But either way, it sounds like there might be people in need of assistance. I heard voices in the fields that I didn't recognize."

His tall companion frowned. "While I do agree that going to see what the source of the shouting would be is a wise choice, we should still observe caution." He commented, earning an eye roll from Lissa.

"Yes, yes, we know, Frederick the Wary." She quipped, flexing her wrist around the healing staff she carried with her. "Well, Chrom, you heard it, you lead the way." She said with a smile, making the blue-haired man shake his head in amusement as he set off across the fields, the voices Chrom had heard earlier reaching them again.

"Ow! Seriously, what the hell grabbed me? I normally don't get hurt this bad!" One of the voices was female, close in age to Chrom, and irate about something. "And this map … How'd that weird, red-headed woman get it? It looks like whoever made this map had the handwriting of an illiterate chicken."

"I don't recognize the landmass either … " The second voice was male, and close to the female voice in age, guiding Chrom closer to their location. He could faintly make out a person in a dark coat nearby, kneeling down as they tended to something – most likely their companion. "And I don't know what hit you either, but yeah … it got you good, Solna. I'd rather not run into it again any time soon."

Soon, the group of three found themselves looking at a pair of young adults, male and female. From what Chrom could tell, they looked at least somewhat related. The male was the one whose dark coat they had spotted, kneeling behind the shirtless female. It seemed like he was tending to her back, her holding long, lavender colored hair out of the way as she examined a map. The man had light blue hair, and bandages were wrapped tightly around his right hand as he worked, brows furrowed. Coughing and turning slightly to preserve the woman's modesty – a glance showed Frederick was doing the same – and Chrom spoke up.

"Is there something we could do to help you two? There's better places to work on that than on the ground, you know."

The young woman let out a flustered, agitated noise, and Chrom braced himself for something to be thrown. The young man, however, seemed to sense the situation. "Solna, no, put down the rock; neither of the guys are looking." He said, making Lissa roll her eyes as she trotted over, staff

in hand. Smiling at the two, she nodded.

"I can finish up her back if you want to explain things, okay?" She offered, giving the man a friendly smile as she extended a hand to shake. The young man watched her a moment before shaking it, standing up and approaching Chrom and Frederick. Lissa turned to the girl with a smile, noting the way the older woman kept her chest covered with a matching coat to her companion. "Hehe, don't worry! My brother knows what I'd do if he tried to peek." The blonde said with a smile, kneeling down to look at the older female's back.

What she saw made her grimace, face pale. Whatever had grabbed the other girl had left a set of long, jagged wounds diagonally down her back from her left shoulder to the right side of her waist. "... You didn't try to fight a wyvern, did you miss …?" She asked as she began to tend to the injuries, the orb at the top of her staff glowing.

"Solna, if my brother's to be believed." The lavender-haired woman replied. "And if I remembered, I would tell you if I wrestled a wyvern or not ..." Sighing, the woman started tying most of her long hair up in a ponytail, exposing a geometric tattoo around her right wrist. Pulling out a leather strap to tie around the tresses, she let out a small grunt. "Whatever it is, it ripped my breast band and shirt … Gonna have to pick up a new one in town."

"Yeah, smart move." Lissa nodded in agreement, seeing the top in question – the back had almost been slashed to ribbons and bloodstained, but the coat nearby was unharmed. "We're not too far off from a village, so that shouldn't be too hard if you have gold." letting out a happy noise, the blonde stood up. "There, got your back about as best as I could; it'll probably scar though ..."

"Ah, I'll live with that." Standing up and turning so her back faced the men, Solna used the leather tie and restrained her hair before scooping her shirt off the ground. "I'll just tighten my coat until I get a new one." Nodding and turning, waved to Chrom as Solna picked up her coat, the two of them heading over to where the others had gathered. Solna's brother was pulling on a pair of gloves Chrom had given him, turning as he heard them approach.

"Feeling better, Solna?" He asked, giving her a smile. "I think this is the first time I've seen you actually hurt that bad." Solna gave a shrug, stopping by her twin. From beside them, Lissa gawked – if she was standing flush against one of the two, she'd come to up to their armpit. As it was, they were only barely shorter than Chrom, looking him in the eye as he gave them an easy smile.

"Good to see you two were alright – I was almost worried we'd find you unconscious." He stated, blue eyes softening as he relaxed his pose. Solna's brother gave a friendly smile.

"I appreciate your concern, Chrom." He replied, chuckling. The statement drew confused looks from Chrom, Lissa, and even Solna. Frederick, however, seemed wary.

"Hmm? So you know of me?" Chrom asked, earning a perplexed look from the lighter-haired male. He brought a hand up to his head rubbing it a he turned to his sister.

"...No? The name just stuck with me … Do you have any ideas, Solna?" He asked, who shrugged.

"All I know is that the name sounds familiar, for some reason." The lavender-haired woman shook her head. "But … your memory's fuzzy too, Felix?" When her brother nodded, she frowned a bit. "And you *wondered* why I double-checked to see if my name was Solna!"

"I'd be very concerned if I couldn't remember the name of my own twin!" Felix shot back, waving his arm around. Solna just opted to slap her face with her left hand, baring a strange, violet mark

that resembled six conjoined eyes. Frederick narrowed his eyes more, but was prevented from speaking up as Lissa snapped her fingers.

"Wait, if you two have fuzzy memory … that's amnesia!"

"No, it's a load of pegasus dung." Frederick said in response, earning a look from the two newcomers. Solna parted her fingers and gave him a wry grin.

"I mean no offense, big guy, but I expected better language from someone who wears a suit under their armor." She commented. Chrom and Lissa both gave Frederick a look, who just arched an eyebrow.

"Amnesiacs are not exactly known for the sort of wit you have just shown, ma'am." He replied, voice stern. Felix seemed to scowl at that, elbowing Solna hard in the ribs.

"Don't antagonize the man in armor." He commented when Solna gave him an odd look, before turning to Frederick himself. "Sorry about her, she's the brash twin… I don't blame your caution – I certainly don't remember much of anything before waking up in this field."

"That just makes the situation even more suspicious." The tall brunet's frown deepened. "If just one of you had boasted amnesia, I would have been more accepting, but both of you? That reeks of foul play." Chrom frowned at that, turning to him.

"Frederick, if you insist on leaving them here ..." He began, frowning. "We're sheperds, aren't we?" Frederick gave a nod at that.

"Yes, but 'twould be wise not to let wolves into the flock." The taller man countered. A sharp inhale from Solna answered him, but it was cut off by the sound of a hand hitting skin. Looking revealed it to be from Felix slapping a hand over Solna's mouth, earning a glare from his supposed twin sister.

"Stop. Antagonizing. The. Big Guy." The lighter-haired male hissed through his teeth, matching brown eyes locking. Seeing the looks they were getting, Felix turned to them. "If there's one thing I know about my sister, it's that she can be quite confrontational if she needs to be."He explained, shooting Solna a glare. "But … you claim to be sheperds? I would be worried more about things other than wo – Solna!" Felix jerked his hand away, wringing it in disgust as Solna shot him a triumphant look.

"And you're the only sheperds I know of who tend to sheep in armor." She said, ignoring the way Felix wiped off his hand on her coat with a smack. "I take it the bears must be larger and on fire in this place."

Chrom just laughed. "It's more like we have a rather large flock of sheep." He replied, smiling despite the way he held up a hand to keep Frederick from talking. It seemed to be some sort of signal, because while the larger male was still giving the twins a distrusting look, he remained silent. "Anyway, I suppose I should give introductions," Chrom continued, smiling and gesturing to Lissa at his side. "The delicate one here is my younger sister, Lissa."

He was rewarded with a hit on the shoulder from Lissa's staff. "I am *not* delicate!" She retorted with a huff, propping the hand without a staff on her hip as Chrom looked at her while rubbing his bare shoulder. Smiling as she turned on her heels to the twins, she gave a small bob of a curtsey. "But it's nice to meet you two."

Solna smiled and nodded back, Felix giving Lissa a smile and a wave before turning to Frederick, stopping when he bumped something with his arm. A quick check made him arch an eyebrow, "...

I must have really been out of it to not notice this sword sooner ..." He commented before shaking his head. "Don't know why I have one of those ..." Solna shrugged, checking her own pockets as her brother looked at Chrom. "And your friend here?"

"Ah, yes, this is Frederick the Wary." Chrom said with a nod to Frederick. The large man gave a crisp, flawless bow that impressed Fleix on account of the armor he was wearing.

"That is a title I shall wear with pride," He stated, straightening as he looked the twins over with a frown. While he could see the sword Felix possessed – as well as what looked like a tome in an interior coat pocket – Solna seemed unarmed. Her quick pocket search had only revealed the map she had been examining upon being found and a strange musical instrument. Turning to Chrom, he gave a nod. "So, what shall we do with them?"

The sapphire haired male sighed, frowning a bit. "It seems cruel to just leave them here … But the robes do seem to come from Plegia," he admitted the last in a tone low enough for Frederick's ears only. "But," Chrom continued, raising his voice again, "Neither of you have done anything to rouse suspicion ..."

Frederick noted the way Felix seemed to tense, shifting so he ever so slightly was in front of his sister. "Perhaps, then, we should take them with us," he replied to Chrom, making sure that he could reach for a weapon if the male twin grew hostile. "If they mean no harm, we can let them walk free. However, I wouldn't recommend just letting them walk as they plea -"

A faint crackle of lightning stopped him, making all three watch as Felix drew the sword he had apparently purchased. The blade was stylized like a lightning bolt, and the third man was frowning at them both. "You reach for any piece of rope *or* my sister and we'll see if memory and skill really are linked or not." He growled out, now completely in front of his sister. Solna seemed legitimately surprised by his actions, the strange flute still in one of her hands.

"How knightly of you to protect your sister," Frederick replied, hands folded loosely behind his back. "Perhaps that portion of your story is true after all." At that, he frowned. "But put your sword away; if we truly believed you hostile, we would not be using diplomacy. Besides," he eyed the sword, "that is a Levin Sword; I imagine it's a bit beyond your skill to use the full power truly, connection to memory or not."

Solna seemed to have recovered herself, as she hit her brother with the hand not holding the instrument. "And you tell *me* not to antagonize the guy in armor?" She demanded, brown eyes flashing. "Which one of us is drawing the sword on them?"

Felix shot her a look"Not antagonizing and not being careless are different things." he said gruffly, returning the blade to its sheath.

"It seems I am not the only one here who seems to be deserving of the title 'the wary'." Frederick commented, arching an eyebrow. "I do commend your reactions, even if they raise more suspicion, Felix the Cautious." Felix opted to give him a withering look, one that Frederick matched squarely.

Scowling and walking around her brother as she stowed the strange flute away, Solna showed the empty palms of her hands. "Look, we're both lost, confused, remember nothing about how we got here; can we save the inquisition until we've had food and I have new clothes?" She stated, looking between Frederick and Chrom.

Lissa chose that moment to speak up. "Yeah, c'mon you guys." she said, nodding at Solna's back. "I did what I could, but her back was pretty bad – we should probably get a better healer to look at it along with getting her new clothes." Nodding, she looked to Chrom. "Southown's not too far

away, and we were heading for it when you heard them, Chrom."

Giving an understanding nod, Chrom looked at the twins. "Very well; we'll just have you two accompany us to Southtown for supplies, and then we'll have to ask the two of you questions. Perhaps the healer can give a better guess as to what injured you so, Solna." Turning to Frederick, he nodded. "Does that work with you, Frederick the Wary?"

Frederick gave a nod after a tense moment, whistling as he turned to a different part of the field. A whicker answered him, and a large, dun-colored horse in armor that matched his trotted up. "Very well, but if you are as injured as Lissa claims, Solna, I do request you ride. It wouldn't do to open your wounds." Solna gave him a wary look, but approached the horse warily. The animal didn't twitch as Frederick pulled the reins over his steed's head to serve as a lead, and merely flicked her ears back as Solna hauled herself up into the saddle. "She's a good, calm girl; the pace will be slow."

"I just pray I don't fall off this giant." Solna replied, steadying herself with a grip on the saddle as Frederick watched her. "I mean, my balance isn't off, but she's so high up … Fitting for someone of your size and build." Settling, she gave Frederick a nod, still gripping the saddle as the group headed off, Chrom in the lead. Lissa was at his side, Felix behind them both. Frederick took up the rear, leading Solna and his horse.

A frown was still on Felix's face, and he looked at Chrom as they walked. "And dare I ask what will become of us if Solna and I can't answer your questions to your satisfaction?" Chrom and Lissa stopped, as did Frederick. Chrom gave Felix a frown as he turned to look at the other male.

"I can't answer that, really. I do want you two to be as innocent as you and your sister claim," He replied, his left arm resting on the hilt of the sword he wore. Solna, now at a different vantage point, took note of the strange mark on Chrom's shoulder. She went to comment when smoke hit her nose, making her look up; Lissa seemed to have noticed something as well, because she had yet to turn to look at Felix, Solna's gaze following hers.

Felix didn't seem amused. "So, Solna and I are more or less prisoners?" To his surprise, Chrom just laughed at the accusation.

"I'm too softhearted to take anything but my own supper as prisoner, if Frederick is to be believed." still, chuckling, the sapphire-haired male gave Felix an easy smile. "If you two don't do anything to arouse suspicion, we'll let you go free … although, if you truly don't have your memories, it might be safer to escort you elsewh-"

"Chrom!" Lissa's shocked exclamation, accompanied by her tugging on her brother's arm, made him stop in mid sentence. Looking at the blonde, Chrom's easy smile turned into a frown as she pointed towards a plume of smoke rising in the distance. "Looks like Southtown's in trouble!"

"If 'trouble' is you way of saying 'currently half of it is on fire', then you're right!" Solna's statement made the others look; the lavender-haired woman stood atop of Frederick's horse with some difficulty, the hand not held to the side for balance shielding her eyes. "I can't make out too much, but it looks like bandits and not just an accident."

A scowl flashed across Chrom's face, and he nodded at Frederick. The large man didn't hesitate to get into the horse's saddle with ease, pulling Solna down so she was seated again. "It would be best if you remained where you are. If there's a fight, it'll be harder for them to injure you, especially since you are unarmed." He stated as Solna turned to look at him; she nodded with a frown, brows furrowed as he kicked the horse into a fast canter.

Felix let out a shout. "Oi! Get back here with my sister!" He called out, following Frederick at a

sprint. Chrom was right behind him, Lissa in the rear. As the group neared the town, the sight of villagers running and hiding as a group of about ten bandits ran around, torching various buildings and stealing goods. Scowling as they looked it over, Chrom gripped his sword and drew it.

"Stay near the rear, Lissa," He told her, exposing the gold and white blade. Lissa nodded – she wasn't the most physical fighter – and Felix had drawn the sword again while handing the tome over towards Solna.

"... Are you sure trusting me with a tome is wise, Felix?" She deadpanned even as she took the tome, revealing a thunderbolt on the cover. "... Well, at least the writing seems … familiar? I'd recommend staying away until I get the hang of this ..."

"Do not fret. I shall make sure you don't set a building on fire … at least not one that isn't already ablaze." Frederick commented as he drew the sharp, beautifully polished spear from the holder on his mount's armor. Solna turned and gave him a flat look.

"I planned on aiming for the moving targets anyway, O Paranoid one." She retorted, earning a wry grin from Frederick as his horse charged towards one of the bandits that had spotted them. Not hesitating – or seeming to notice Solna in front of him – the brunet male lowered the spear into position. The brigand didn't have a chance to turn or halt before he was run through, the silvered steel turning scarlet from the action.

Chrom rushed past a second later, the sword in his hands blocking one from an attacking swordsman. While the brigand managed to leave a cut on Chrom's arm, the sapphire-haired male responded with a kick to his attacker's stomach before bringing his blade down in an overhand swing. A flash of red filled the air later, and the brigand fell over with a cry as he bled out.

When the next brigand – a mage – bore down upon Chrom, Solna spotted a third one with an axe charging them while Chrom was distracted. Scowling, she opened the tome she held, extending her left arm with a shout. A bolt of lightning fell from the sky at her shout, hitting the brigand's raised weapon and sending him to the ground in a twitching heap, stunned. She stared for a moment before a wide grin spread over her face. "... I don't know how I can do that or why, but I *like* zapping people."

"As long as you refrain from zapping us, I see no quandary with back up." Frederick deadpanned as Chrom managed to kill the mage, wincing from some wounds caused by a wind spell. Turning the mount towards him, the brunet nodded at Chrom. "Are you well, milo-!" His statement was cut off as Solna swung from the horse, knocking Chrom to one side as a far more powerful wind spell hurtled towards where Chrom had been mere seconds ago.

The spell seemed to do little more to Solna than ruffle her hair. "Bah, Predictable!" she scoffed, the tome she had been given open as she pointed at the enemy mage. "Here's how it's done!" The brand on her hand flashed violet, catching Frederick's attention as a far larger flash of lightning struck the mage, sending them to the ground with a scream of pain.

Chrom didn't seem to have noticed the flash of light from Solna's hand, darting past her to run the now- recovered bandit through with his sword. "I owe you!" he called over his shoulder as Solna grinned. Frederick placed a pair of gloves in her hand soon after, a frown on his face when she turned to him.

"That flash will alert your enemies." He explained as Solna paused to pull the gloves on. "Best to keep it hidden." Nodding, but still suspicious at the generosity, Solna slipped the gloves on before charging after Chrom, Frederick behind them.

A short distance away, Felix kept himself between Lissa and attacking brigands, the Levin

Sword's jagged edge leaving uncomfortable wounds that, even if the bandits survived, would take a while to heal. 'There's a trick to making the lightning work, I know it …!' The blue-haired male cursed to himself, frowning as he got a moment of downtime while Lissa healed him. He had noticed the flashes of lightning, making him shake his head. "Well, it seems like Solna's fairing well." He commented as both he and Lissa continued on, keeping a wary eye for more brigands as he focused more on his sword. "At least Chrom seems to be following the strategy."

"Yeah, it's a good one!" Lissa nodded, keeping behind the tall male. "If you need help with that sword though, I can give some pointers; I know at hing or two about magic." Felix nodded as they rounded a corner, his grip on the sword tightening. "Even if you don't get the magic working, you seem to know how to hit things with a sword at least."

"Couldn't tell you how I know that much, but I'm grateful for it in this scenario." Felix nodded with a grunt, spotting Chrom as he wounded one of the last bandits standing. Dashing forward, he thrust the point of the Levin sword into the man's thigh. The unexpected blow kept the brigand from retaliating as Chrom drove his sword through the man's lung. "Hey, where's Solna and Frederick?" Felix asked as Lissa rushed forward, tending to her brother's injuries.

Letting the blue light from the heal staff wash over him, Chrom nodded to a separate part of town. "I think they're helping out over there – your sister's got a knack for dropping lightning on things." Felix turned to look, spotting Frederick's horse as it kicked a different brigand into the water; both the knight and Solna seemed to be helping fetch water to help put out some of the burning houses.

Satisfied that his sister was unharmed, Felix turned to look down the bridge he, Chrom and Lissa stood in front of. There was one brigand left, and judging from his bulk and the fact that he seemed to be the one who has the most muscle mass of the bandits. "... We're going to have to work together to take him down, I bet." He whispered to Chrom, who nodded.

"I'll keep close, but Lissa, stay careful." The sapphire-haired male told his sister, who nodded. Felix was examining the bandit, tightening his grip on the Levin Sword before giving Chrom a nod.

"You go from the front, and I'll flank you and come up behind him." He muttered to Chrom, who nodded. Shifting, both blue-haired men darted forward, Chrom a bit more in the lead as he intercepted the bandit from the front. Felix kept going, making sure not to slip and fall, and grinned as the bandit grunted in pain from the gash Chrom made on his chest. Chrom managed to dodge the thrown axe, allowing Felix to slash at the man's back.

"Have another!" Chrom shouted, running forward and jamming the sword in his hands through the man's lung. Letting out a gurgle, the bandit twitched, stumbling when the sword was drawn out of him. Felix dodged out of the way, watching the man fall with a grimace on his face before walking over to where Chrom and Lissa stood. "That's that." The sapphire-haired male muttered darkly, cleaning off his blade before stowing it away in his scabbard again.

"That sounds about right." Felix agreed, looking around the town; most of the burning buildings had been extinguished, and none of the bandits were left standing. "I can't see Frederick or Solna though ..."

"Knowing Frederick, he's getting her new clothes now that the fighting's done." Lissa commented drily, running off to tend to some of the injured villagers nearby. Chrom offered his vulneary to another before turning to Felix with a wry smile.

"Well, you certainly seem to have a knack for strategy." He commented, voice friendly. "Not something I was suspecting with your amnesia, to be honest." Felix gave a weak chuckle, storing his own sword away.

"It … well, I felt like I could see things." He admitted, scratching his head to ruffle his light blue hair. "How battle would flow and such … it was weird, to be honest. I can't fully describe it."

"So a strategist, then? Perhaps if you turn out to not be a Plegian scout, you could stay on as a tactician." Chrom said with a nod, his voice still friendly. Felix looked around, examining the battlefield and brigands.

"If Plegians are these guys … then I think it's fairly safe to say that I am not one of them." He deadpanned before grabbing his head. "...? Something came to me ..." Shaking his head, he blinked. "Okay … weird … Solna and I … we were helping out mother with something recently … but that's about as solid as I can recall."

Chrom gave a relieved sigh. "Well, at least it's something; don't strain yourself and let the memory come back to you naturally." Reaching forward, he clapped Felix's shoulder.

Frederick approached soon after, unscathed. "Some of the village women are assisting in finding Solna some new clothing." He explained, hands folding behind his back. "She was quite reliable in the fight, even going so far as to jump in the way of a bandit or two attacking villagers. I am a … bit wary of her fondness for electrocuting things, however."

"It … might be a side effect of whatever gave us amnesia?" Felix offered with a weak shrug, not knowing the reasoning himself. "I don't think she's always been like this?" There was a waver to his voice that made Frederick arch an eyebrow, but refrained from commenting as Chrom chuckled and stepped closer.

"We should head out for Ylisstol after she's back with us. I think it's safe to say that, if the twins wished us harm, they wouldn't have aided us like they did." He stated, making eye contact with Frederick as he spoke. Frowning at the stern look the knight was giving him, the sapphire-haired male nodded at Felix. "He aided me and protected Lissa from harm, and you said yourself that Solna was helping those who were unarmed. At the least, they mean no harm to us."

"Very well." The knight acquiesced, turning when he heard footsteps approaching them. It was Solna, leading his horse behind her – she now wore a simple, dark violet tunic underneath her coat, one that covered her figure as she stopped in front of the others assembled, handing the horse over to Frederick. "I see that they were able to assist you swiftly." Frederick commented as he took the reins. Solna just gave him a wry grin.

"They didn't even bother searching through women's things, just handed me a man's tunic." She said with a shrug. "I admire the practicality."

Frederick responded with a nod, giving the lavender-haired woman a wry grin. "Considering your height in comparison to most women, I can see why that was a fair course of action. Even if it cost you a rather handy distraction tactic."

"Bah, I think most men would be more startled by a large woman bearing down on them." Solna scoffed. "Unless you're trying to admit to peeking – I thought they taught chi-"

"Solna!" Felix cut his twin off, voice flustered. "Stop antagonizing the man in full plate armor!" Solna responded with a cackle as she shook her head in amusement, ignoring the way Chrom stared at her in confusion. Lissa had rejoined the group at some point in the conversation, because she seemed just as baffled – Frederick merely looked mildly put out.

"As I have stated before, you have far too much of a clever wit to be truly amnesiac." He said simply, before giving her a disarming smile. "But it is not often I find one who has the bravery to argue back with me in such a manner; I'm glad you are not the dull sword in the armory." Solna

scowled at the jab, but was prevented from retaliating when Frederick shifted the conversation. "Was a healer able to tell what had given your back such harsh injuries?"

"No, unfortunately. They said it was far too big to be a wyvern." Solna shook her head, frowning. "But they'll heal over. I'll probably have the scars for a good long time, but that's not a problem." Turning to Felix, she nodded at him. "Is your hand still hurting you, Felix?"

Felix shook his head. "No … at least, the burning isn't as bad as it was when we first regained consciousness." He admitted. "I think part of it might be from just using the sword, though. It felt … natural to be holding something like that. Like I've done it before." Solna nodded in understanding.

"Yeah, I found reading the tome really easy too. Plus, zapping brigands was oddly cathartic, for some reason ..." Shrugging, she stretched. "So, where to now, Chrom? It seems like you're the one who calls the shots here." She admitted, giving Frederick a curious look. The large brunet didn't respond, simply turning to Chrom as the young man nodded.

"We should head back for Ylisstol now; Frederick, Lissa and I have been gone a while, plus we can introduce you and Felix to some people." He said with a smile, propping one hand on his sword. "Your brother seems to have a knack for strategy, at the least."

"Solna does too – she just needs a bit more time to plan stuff usually." Felix offered, smiling at his sister. "I think that's one of the things we've always done together; two heads are better than one, after all." Solna responded with a laugh and a nod, smiling easily. Chrom seemed to relax at the notion, smiling and nodding.

"That's that, then; let's get going." He stated, only to stop when Lissa let out a frustrated noise.

"But Chroooooooooooooom!" The blonde pouted, frowning. "It'll be getting dark soon! Why don't we stay the night and head back in the morning?" Frederick and Chrom both gave her amused looks, the latter just chuckling at her.

"Oh, it won't be so bad, Lissa. Just a fun camp out." He said, reaching out and patting his sister's head. His laughter grew more cheerful as she swatted his hand, drawing it away and nodding at the village headman. "We'll give word to have some supplies sent here to help you repair; the bandits have been getting more antsy by the day. Look for the Falcon Knights in a few days time." He said, earning a nod from the portly man. Turning to the rest with him, he grinned. "Well then, let's be off."

Lissa groaned as she followed her brother, Felix and Solna following her. Frederick mounted his horse as he took the rear, shooting a wary look at the twins' backs before turning in the saddle to look towards the mountains nearby. If the bandits had come from Plegia, that meant one of the mountain villages had been hit …

A small village on the mountains between Plegia and Ylisse had been set to burn, most of the villagers lying dead in the streets. One house that stood a bit apart from the others was not aflame, having simply been collapsed instead. A lone woman with indigo hair laid in the wreckage, teetering on the edge of death as she tried to crawl out. A strange, half-modified staff was clenched in one hand as she struggled, the gem on the surface dull as she lifted her head to the sky. The clouds were still there, puffy and pale against the deep blue sky.

"Be … safe ..." she gasped, coughing as she felt blood enter her mouth. "Solna … Felix ..." Struggling more, she managed to roll over onto her back, exposing a long set of slashes down her torso, cutting her open from collarbone to navel. They bled sluggishly, dirt and grime from the

destroyed home infecting them – she knew she had little time left.

The sound of a wyvern's wings reached her ears, something blocking out the sun. Hazy brown eyes tried to focus, only seeing a large, winged shape in the sky, making her smile bitterly. "I'm … sorry, my old friend. You … your visit came a day too late ..." She laughed bitterly, coughing as life continued to slip from her.

She was faintly aware of the shape landing a short distance away as her eyes closed, a sad smile on her face. "Please, Naga … let my children escape their 'fate' … Grima can't .. return ..."

Life left her a moment later, the distant sound of someone yelling her name chasing her into the abyss.

Gathering Darkness

Chapter Summary

Author: Mags

A disgruntled whine softly echoed through the forest's night air, followed by a faintly amused chuckle.

"I told you it was getting dark, but you just HAD to not wanna stay at that village for the night..." Lissa complained, swinging her staff back and forth. "Ech! The bugs are out now! Noisy, disgusting bugs that buzz around and crawl all over and bite you when-" A half strangled noise escaped her, followed by several coughs. "-Agh! Won goph in mah mouph!"

Chrom chuckled again as Felix tried to help Lissa cough the bug out of her throat. "Aw, come on now, Lissa. Hardship builds character. Want to help me gather firewood?"

"Tpht! Tpht! Blech! Yeeeeuck! Oh good, it came out..." she sighed. "I'll pass on finding firewood, thanks. I think I've built QUITE enough character for one day."

"If you're going for firewood, you mind looking for something edible?" asked Solna. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving."

Fredrick hummed in agreement as he dismounted his horse. "Yes, I should think a little gathering and hunting is in order about now... Provided our guests don't mind clearing a campsite while Milord and I find us a meal."

"Not at all." replied Felix as he started to do just that. He winced in pain and sharply withdrew his hand from a stone he'd tried to move. "Ngh! And here I thought this had stopped being a problem..."

"What happened to your hand anyways?" asked Lissa, stepping closer to the light haired male.

"We don't know." said Solna. "It was pretty badly burned, so I wrapped it as best I could before he tried to bandage my back..."

The blonde hummed, then beckoned Felix. "Come here and lemme see your hand."

He did as requested, holding his right hand out to the healer.

"Well, these are on here pretty good if nothing else..." Lissa noted as she removed the bandages. A startled gasp escaped her once enough were removed that the condition of his hand was visible – the flesh was burnt worse than if it had been a simple accident, such as touching a pot over a fire. His fingers appeared to have escaped whatever caused the injury, but the back of his hand, his palm, and his wrist bore the scars. "...Holy smokes, I haven't seen burns like this since I had to help patch up Vaike after he got Miriel mad!"

"I don't recognize those names, but it certainly sounds like one hell of a story." commented Solna. "Is there anything you can do for him?"

Lissa nodded. "Yeah, I can heal this... at least, enough that it won't hurt. I can't do anything about the scars... and what's this?"

"What's what?" asked Felix, then he looked at the back of his hand. A strange purple marking sat unmarred in the center of the burns. "...When did I get a seemingly magical tattoo?"

Now curious, the lavender-haired girl approached and gave the mark a curious look. "...I don't know, but..." she pulled off one of her gloves and moved her hand beside her brothers. An identical symbol was on the back of her hand. "...I have one as well."

"Maybe it's a birthmark?" Offered the healer, her staff glowing with blue light as she mended Felix's hand. "I mean, you guys said you were twins. Kinda fitting it's even on opposite sides..."

"Doesn't mean I like it." Solna said, a sigh following as she pulled the glove back on. "I really hope your brother and the big guy bring enough food..."

Felix nodded as Lissa re-applied the bandages to his hand. "Likewise."

"We're back." Fredrick proclaimed, causing the three seated by a campfire to turn towards him.

"Hey, about time- is that a BEAR?!"

"No, it's dinner." laughed Chrom. "Hope it's not a problem-"

"I'll take a leg, please!" Solna said, a gleeful gleam in her eyes.

Apart from the crackling fire and a half stifled chuckle from Felix, there was silence.

"...What?" she asked, sounding perplexed by the odd looks she was getting. "I'm hungry!"

"...But will you actually eat it?" asked Fredrick.

"I'd wager this is a moment where it doesn't matter what the food is, she's going to eat it and you can't stop her."

Solna gestured to her brother. "See? He gets it!"

"He's your brother."

"It still counts, Chrom!"

Lissa just sighed. "I'll pass! Gods, couldn't you spear us an animal that normal people eat for once?"

"There was little other option, milady." reported the knight as he set about making a meal out of the bear. "T'was all we could find, so if it is not to your liking, you will have to grin and bear it."

"...Was the pun necessary, Fredrick?"

He chuckled. "No, but it is amusing."

"At least it was bearable- OW!" Solna turned towards her brother. "What?"

"Food first, then japes." He said, lowering his arm from where he'd struck her with his elbow.

A sigh was her response. "Fine..."

"It's been too long since I last had bear meat. Delicious!"

"...I suspect Solna shares your enthusiasm for it, milord." noted Fredrick as he watched the lavender haired woman devour her portion with gusto. A glance towards her brother revealed him eating at an only moderately slower pace. "I'd ask how long it had been since either of them had a meal, but I feel as though the answer is 'at least not since breakfast'."

"Try not for a few days!" exclaimed Lissa.

Solna chuckled as she finished the bite she'd been chewing. "No no, I just have a big appetite. Mother complained about it... often..."

"...Sister?"

"...Felix, do you..." she asked, her voice somewhat quiet. "...Do you feel like we've forgotten something... important?"

His response came after several moments of silence. "...I do."

Lissa and Chrom exchanged concerned glances as the twins went quiet. Fredrick arched an eyebrow, but refrained from making a comment.

"...Not even an inkling?" Felix asked, finally breaking the silence.

"None." sighed Solna. "...Just another riddle for us to solve, I suppose."

Lissa scooted closer to the twins. "Anything about your mom that you do remember?"

"Just that she was the village's healer where we lived, really..."

Chrom leaned towards Fredrick, speaking with a hushed tone. "The more they speak, the more I feel their tale rings true, Fredrick."

"...I cannot deny I am inclined towards the same, milord." replied the knight. "But belief and trust are separate matters."

"I'll take what I can get... which will include your serving if you don't eat."

Fredrick hesitated slightly. "...My hunger may have gotten the better of me before we left town, so I may have purchased something to tide me over for our travel back to the capital..."

The sapphire-haired man chuckled. "So even the strong will of Fredrick the Wary can falter in the face of a meal. Far be it for me to judge if it means I may indulge myself a bit more."

"By all means." said Fredrick, offering his portion of bear meat to Chrom.

"Geez Solna, where do you put it all?!" Lissa exclaimed as the lavender-haired woman ate a second helping of bear meat.

"My stomach, obviously." She replied simply. "It's delicious."

The blonde's jaw dropped in confusion. "Delicious?! It smells like old boots! Wait, no I take that back – BOOTS smell better!"

"Hey, you're the one who doesn't wanna eat it so why should I let it go to waste?"

"...Felix, your sister is weird."

"Everyone marches to the beat of their own drum." He remarked as he finished his portion of the meat. "Solna's just happens to have a different tempo than most."

"You're not much better."

He just smiled. "I never said I was."

The forest was quiet as the group rested, the starry sky and half-moon bathing the land in gentle light. Yet even in the still night, it seemed as though Chrom would not find peaceful slumber till dawn. A distant, faint rumbling noise carried its way to his ear, rousing him from his sleep.

"...Huh?"

As he got to his feet, Lissa stirred and sleepily stood as well.

"What's wrong, big brother?" she asked with a yawn, half bracing herself on her healing staff.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you." He apologized. "It's just... something seems amiss."

Lissa arched an eyebrow at her sibling. "Define 'something'."

"I'm not sure... I think I'll have a look around."

"Not alone, you won't!" she retorted, following Chrom as he started away from the small campsite. "I'm coming too."

A soft chuckle and a quick hug around the shoulders was his response. "Thanks, Lissa."

The siblings quietly strode off into the forest, the ambient sounds of the night surrounding them as they walked. It was not to last, however. Once they were a ways away from the camp, the forest became silent as the grave, and this odd change was not unnoticed.

"It sure is dark..." remarked the blonde as they entered a small clearing. "...Quiet, too. Where did the birds and bugs go...?"

"Something is wrong here..."

As if invoked by those words, a rumble resounded through the land itself, forcing the siblings to do their best to keep their balance.

"Aaah! Chrom!"

"Gods, what – Agh! What is this madness?!" shouted Chrom. "Lissa, stay close!"

Nodding, the blonde carefully stepped closer to her brother as he surveyed the area.

"...Lissa, run." He said, watching as trees in the distance fell over like twigs in a storm.

"Huh?"

"I mean it!" Chrom insisted, pushing his sister in the direction opposite of the falling trees. "Go!"

The two of them sprinted away as the place they'd once stood splintered and rose, fire pouring out from beneath the surface. Balls of flame rained down around the forest, turning it into a raging

inferno. Chrom and Lissa sped through the blaze, finally coming to a stop in a clearing that had thus far escaped the fire. The blonde leaned forward, trying to catch her breath as her brother stared in awe at the flames, looking up in time to see something beginning to materialize in the air.

"Chrom, what IS that?!"

The blue-haired male whirled around to see what his sister was pointing at, and had no trouble spotting the massive, runed ring that had taken shape in the air. A crystalline structure appeared in the middle, opening like an eye and gleaming with brilliant light. Two dark shapes emerged from the 'eye' and gracelessly fell to the ground, rising to their feet within moments. Piercing red eyes cut through the shadows where they stood, unearthly moaning noises escaping the same area.

"Lissa, you'd better stand back." Chrom stated firmly, unsheathing his blade as his sister quickly stepped away.

The figures stepped forward with staggered steps, limply letting their arms flail back and forth as the axes they held dragged along the ground. One made a sort of groaning shout before it sprinted towards Chrom in a bid to cleave him in two, but the sapphire-haired swordsman was faster between them, keenly slashing the assailant across the back as he darted past to avoid the axe. However, the sound of unnaturally turning bones caused Chrom to spin around in time to catch the stranger's axe with his blade. They were not one lacking strength, much to Chrom's dismay, but with a flourish of steel and a quick shove, his attacker fell to the ground long enough to give him the chance to finish them by way of sword through their back. The figure let out a weak groan as its body melted into purple mist, Chrom pausing to catch his breath. His sister screaming in panic caused him to turn quickly, seeing the other figure bearing down on her as she tried in vain to potentially use her healing staff to protect herself.

Unseen by either of the siblings, however, was the appearance of another stranger from the same odd 'eye' the first two had fallen out of. They landed with far more grace, sprinting ahead of Chrom. In one swift motion, the new stranger caught the attacker's axe with their sword, the clash of steel ringing through the air as they shielded Lissa. The healer slowly opened her eyes, gasping in surprise when she saw her rescuer.

"Help!" called out the masked swordsman, turning their head in the direction of Chrom.

It took a moment for the words to actually register with him, before he responded with a nod. "...Right!"

Sprinting forward with sword drawn and a battle cry at his lips, he succeeded in getting the attacker's attention away from the masked man long enough for them to parry the axe and slash them across the stomach as Chrom's blade sliced through their back. The axeman melted into purple mist like the one before it had, and Lissa slumped against the stone she'd been backed up against with a heavy sigh.

"Quite an entrance." commented Chrom as he turned to face the stranger who protected his sister, watching them sheath their blade. "What's your name?"

"Milord! Milady!"

The siblings turned towards the new voice, the masked swordsman slipping away into the forest while they were distracted by the appearance of Fredrick, Solna, and Felix – the former two arriving on Fredrick's horse.

"Are you hurt?" inquired the knight, his question going unanswered as several creatures much like the two axemen Chrom had dealt with moments ago started shambling out of the forest with

inhuman moans.

"What in the...? Are these creatures commonplace in these lands?"

Chrom shook his head. "They're not from Ylisse, I promise you that... but whatever they are, they can die like anything else."

"Huh? H-Hey, Chrom! He's gone!" Lissa exclaimed, prompting Solna to look at her.

"Who's gone?"

"The masked man who saved me! If it wasn't for him, I'd..."

Fredrick tugged at his horse's reigns as he withdrew his lance. "We can worry about him once these... things... have been put to the blade. Keep your wits about you – we know nothing of this enemy."

"I-I do!" Lissa stated. "Or at least, I saw a few things when Chrom and that masked man were fighting them!"

"Speak quickly, since these ones seem keen on giving us a demonstration..." remarked Felix, withdrawing the Levin Sword from its sheath.

"They can turn there heads like an owl and once they die, they melt into smokey purple stuff!"

Solna gave the healer and odd look as she slipped off of Fredrick's horse and moved towards Lissa. "Well if nothing else, we can be sure of when they're dead."

"Aye." agreed Fredrick. "Then we'd best speed them to their end!"

Two of the creatures made angry groans before rushing forward, one carrying a sword and the other hefting an axe, and lashing out at Chrom and Felix. The former was cut across his exposed arm, wincing in pain as he struck back at his attacker, while the latter sidestepped the axe and pierced the axeman's chest with his blade, prying it free with a kick to their chest. The axeman gave a weak moan as it melted into purple mist, soon joined by the swordsman that had attacked Chrom.

"Checkmate!"

A bolt of lightning struck down a different sword-wielding creature that'd decided Lissa and Solna looked like better targets than the three males with sharp objects in hand. Several of its allies thought similarly, among them a pair of archers. One kept his bow trained on Solna as it waited for an opportune moment to let loose an arrow – preferably to somewhere exposed so as to kill her more quickly, while the other was taking aim at Chrom. Unfortunately for the latter, the sound of a horse's hooves pounding the ground reached it mere moments before the lance of the person riding it punctured its torso.

"Captain Chrom!" called out the rider, a woman clad in red armor. "Captain, are you alright?"

"Sully?!" exclaimed the sapphire-haired swordsman in surprise as he cut down another of the creatures. "Ha! Better late than never, I suppose! We could certainly use another hand! Get to work!"

"Yes sir!" she replied, kicking a swordsman who tried to approach from the side before jabbing them in the neck. "Dunno what these ash-faced freaks are, but if they want a fight, I'll give 'em one to-"

"Hold, milady!"

Sully looked over her shoulder, finding a man with gray-blue hair approaching her, a bow and quiver on his back. He looked more like the type to be seen in the presence of nobility than a battlefield.

"Life may be long, but attraction is fleeting! Would you leave me in your sweet dust?" he asked, apparently heedless of the battle around him, even as Fredrick cut down several more of the creatures not ten feet behind him. "Leave the war to the warriors, dear bird! A beauty such as you need wage only love!"

The cavalier arched an eyebrow. "...I dunno what you're talking about OR who the hell you are, Ruffles, but in case you hadn't noticed-" Another would-be attacker was met with her lance, this time piercing their skull. "-There's a battle going on, so save the fancy talk for when it's over!"

A sigh escaped the odd man. "I suppose your words ring true, milady... Thus I shall offer my aid if you answer but one humble request; may I know your name?"

"Heh, your life to throw away pal." she replied. "But the name's Sully. Now put that bow of yours to work if you know how to use it!"

"At once, milady!" he replied, saluting crisply before withdrawing his bow and knocking an arrow. "I, Virion, am the archest of archers!"

"Oh great, Sully made a new friend again..." sighed Lissa as she healed Solna, the lavender-haired woman pulling an arrow out of her left shoulder. "At least he's more helpful than the last one."

Solna glanced towards the archer, who seemed to be having a bit of trouble with one of the creatures – mainly in that it wasn't letting him get the chance to shoot it. "So your friend attracting odd men to battlefields is a regular occurrence?"

"Guys in general, really. This seems to be a night for firsts..."

"Hey, blue!" Solna called out. "Duck!"

Virion turned in time to see arcane glyphs appear, doing as commanded so as to not be struck by lightning instead of the axeman that'd set its sights on him.

"Ah, many thanks, milady!" he called out. "Now, this shall be one for the bards!"

"What are-"

Three arrows sailed past Solna and Lissa, and soon after the sound of three bodies hitting the ground echoed behind them. The two women turned around to discover three of the creatures had tried to sneak up on them, and were met with an arrow between their eyes. Said arrows fell to the ground once the corpses melted away, leaving Solna and Lissa momentarily stunned.

"The favor is repaid!" said Virion, turning his attention back to the rest of the battle. "Now, to show these upstart monstrosities how a gentleman wages war!"

"...I think your friend found a keeper."

"Provided he can survive her..."

Solna rolled her eyes. "And that made me remember a conversation with Felix on almost the same subject."

"What, did he say the same thing about you?" Lissa asked.

On cue, another creature was smote by lightning.

"...I'll take that as a yes."

On another part of the battlefield, Felix cut down a mage among the creatures and turned to see how Fredrick fared. The answer turned out to be quite well... apart from one thing.

"Fredrick, behind you!"

Hearing the shout, the knight swung backwards with his lance, knocking aside a thrown axe with impeccable timing.

"You have my thanks, Felix!" He called out, turning back towards the foe before him and running them through. Within a moment, he'd turned his horse towards the source of the axe – a larger creature than others standing a ways away. "Hmph. So their strongest has taken the field..."

"I believe that one is the leader." stated Felix as he approached Fredrick. "And if it is, well... I'm sure it's obvious what will happen once it's slain."

Fredrick smirked, readying his lance. "Aye, that it is. Climb aboard – it may have friends nearby."

"Right." said the blue-haired male, climbing onto the back of the war horse with only a slight amount of difficulty. "Ready!"

"Then let us be off!" exclaimed the night, spurring his horse forward towards the leader.

"RYAAARGH!" it bellowed, hurling another axe at the two now charging at it. The weapon never hit its mark, as a burst of lightning from Felix's blade knocked it off course.

"PICK A GOD AND PRAY!"

With a swift motion as the warhorse thundered past, the creature's head was liberated from its shoulders by way of gleaming steel piercing through its throat. The head, and the body it was separated from, melted into purple mist before they could hit the ground. Fredrick tugged on the reigns, bringing his horse to a stop as so he might survey the battlefield.

"...Hmph. I expected more of a challenge." he remarked, spotting something off to one side. "...And I believe I have found the 'Masked Man' milady spoke of."

Looking in the direction the knight was facing, Felix likewise spotted someone sheathing a blade. "Most likely... it's the only other person here besides us, that cavalier in red armor, and the archer."

"I know not the archer, but I do know the other." said Fredrick as he made his horse start moving back towards the others. "Sully has always possessed impeccable timing along with formidable skill with a lance."

"Another of the Shepherds?"

He nodded. "Correct. A word of caution, however; I would advise against provoking her more than I would against provoking me. She has a temper as fiery as the red of her armor."

"...I'll keep that in mind."

Chrom sighed as he sheathed his blade, striding towards the masked swordsman as the others

present converged on his location. Lissa was the first to catch up.

"Hey, um... thank you for saving me before." she said, smiling nervously at the masked man. "You were very brave."

"...I did as any in my position would do." replied the swordsman with a modest tone.

"Not many could face so many foes so readily." commented Fredrick, his horse stopping at the edge of the group. "But you have my thanks as well."

"And mine." Chrom added. "You saved my sister's life. My name is Chrom. Might I ask yours?"

The masked man remained quiet for a moment before answering. "You may call me Marth."

"Marth? After the heroic king of old?" asked the sapphire-haired swordsman. "You certainly fought like a hero from what I could see. Where did you learn your way with a sword?"

"I'm not here to talk about me." stated Marth with a stern tone. "This world teeters at the brink of a horrible calamity. What you saw tonight was but a prelude. You have been warned."

"Huh?" asked Lissa as Marth turned and began to leave. "What's teetering where now? Hey, wait!"

Solna hummed curiously. "Not much for conversation, are they?"

"Perhaps his skills lie elsewhere, though I wager we'll hear of him again." said Fredrick. "For now, I'm more concerned about the capital. We should make haste."

"Oh for... how's THIS for an answer?!"

"OOF!"

The group turned, finding Virion doubled over while Sully was righting herself in her saddle.

"G-goodness, but those shapely legs certainly can kick, can't they..." groaned the archer. "P-please, milady! Allow me to accompany you! Mine is a cold, empty world without you! I shall be your most willing servant, and you, in turn, will give my life purpose..."

"...Who's this?" asked Chrom.

"Some braggart who actually lives up to his boasts." replied the cavalier. "Never seen anybody that good with a bow before, but he's got another thing coming if he thinks his honeyed words will charm someone like me!"

A sigh escaped Chrom. "How long has he been following you?"

Sully shrugged. "I dunno. A few hours now?"

"I shall follow milady to the ends of the earth!" proclaimed Virion, posing dramatically.

"...Well, he's certainly not from around here." Solna remarked dryly. "The lady on the horse, though? HER I like."

"Oh ho, what have we here? Another fair-"

"Keep talking and we'll find out how good I am with this tome." said the lavender-haired woman with a pleasant tone and a wicked smile. "Hopefully I won't end up causing permanent harm..."

The archer's words died in his throat as he eyed the tome in Solna's hand, Felix and Sully chuckling.

"Dunno who you are, but the feelings mutual." said the cavalier. "And who's the other guy?"

"That's... got something of a story to it." admitted Chrom. "But we'll have ample time to go over it on the way to the capital. No use trying to sleep now..."

Sheperds

"So the Captain found you two in a field, and decided to keep you around after giving some bandits the boot?" Sully arched an eyebrow as she sat on her horse, munching on a piece of beef jerky she had pulled out from a saddlebag. "Huh. Could have been a weirder introduction – the Captain has an gift for finding the oddest of people."

"You're one of them, Sully." Chrom shot back to the red-clad cavalier, giving his sister a piggyback. The adrenaline had left Lissa shortly after they had started walking again, and had fallen asleep within a few yards of Chrom starting to carry her. He didn't seem to be complaining, occasionally shifting his grip as they walked.

Sully just grinned at his barb. "Huh! I could say the same of you, and we've known one another gods knows how long." Smirking and nodding at Frederick, she jabbed her thumb at Virion, who was walking and conversing with the twins. "Want me to take Ruffles on ahead? I can let the rest of the group know about those ash-faced freaks while I'm at it." She asked.

Frederick gave a nod. "I do request the twins say with us for the time being, at least, due to the circumstances of their joining. One of your strays, even one who speaks so oddly? I think he'll fit right in." Sully responded with a hand gesture that made Frederick laugh, before turning her horse and trotting it over to the group of three. After a moment or two – and a whap to the back of Virion's head – and the archer was seated behind Sully as she took off, heading in a different direction from the group.

"So where are they headed?" Felix asked, biting back a yawn as he winced at the rising sun. Nighttime marching was exhausting, and he was certain the only reason he wasn't starved was from Solna's stash of bear jerky. A search of his own pockets had the blue-haired male discover a strange tome, one that seemed to hold notes on forging instead of magic. He had wanted to read while they walked, but the fear for Virion's safety around Solna had distracted him.

"Oh, Sully's just taking Virion to meet the others." Chrom said with a shrug, somehow not waking Lissa with the action. "Once we've checked on Ylisstol and such, we'll head out as well. I just want to make sure that what happened last night hasn't reached there too." Shifting slightly, he turned to the twins, giving them a wry grin. "Plus, there's someone I want to introduce you two to."

"Are we there yet ..." The groggy sounding question came from Lissa, who yawned from her spot on Chrom's back. Shaking her head, the blonde rubbed one eye. "Well, at least the sun's up ..." Chrom just chuckled and smiled.

"Up for walking again, Lissa? I haven't had to carry you around like this for years now." The sapphire-haired male asked his sister, who nodded. Kneeling briefly to let her off of his back, Chrom grunted and stretched his arms and back, bones and joints popping. "Why did Maribelle talk you into wearing that crinoline?"

"She fussed at me until I agreed to it." Lissa responded with another yawn, stretching as well. "I'm not fond of it either, but it does catch the odd weapon swung at me from time to time." Lightly slapping her cheeks to wake herself up fully, the blonde turned to Solna and Felix. "Oh, Maribelle's a friend of mine; I can introduce you guys later on."

"For now, we should continue onward." Frederick spoke up from where he had ridden ahead a few paces, horse stopped. "We'll be at Ylisstol in fifteen minutes tops if we press ourselves, and from there get breakfast from a street vendor."

"I can get behind that." Solna commented, reaching into an inner pocket on her coat. "Good thing I saved some of dinner ..." The lavender-haired woman grinned as she pulled a pouch out of the pocket, opening it and pulling out what could only be a piece of bear jerky. "Anybody else wants some?" She offered the pouch around, laughing when Chrom and Felix both dove a hand in to grab some themselves.

"Well, Solna, you're practical if nothing else." Chrom shook his head with a laugh as the group started walking again, the sapphire-haired male walking between the twins to better talk with them. "Between that and the two fights you helped out in, it's a relief that your memory wasn't entirely claimed by … whatever it was that claimed it."

Solna snorted, chewing on another piece of jerky. "Thanks for the compliments, Chrom; Felix's on-the-fly plans are better than mine, or if he's defending something. If you need to plan a strategy in advance, or attacking a fortress, I'm the one to come to. But when the two of us work together?"

"There's very little the two of us can't figure out how to do, let alone win." Felix finished his sister's statement, having pulled out the tome he had found in his coat earlier. "Like I said earlier, two heads are better than one, and twins are notoriously good at being on the same mental wavelength as one another." Solna gave an agreeing nod, making Chrom look between the two in confusion as he had another piece of Solna's jerky.

"You two are twins?" He asked, surprised. "That's … well, you *do* look like siblings, but the twins deal is a bit hard for me to wrap my head around." At that, he gave a small laugh. "But that might just be because of the different colored hair; the only other set of twins I saw had matching hair colors."

"Well, we're identical in almost every other way?" Solna offered with a shrug, looking between herself and Felix. It was true – barring their sexes and hair color, there was little to differentiate between the two. Both twins sported the same brown eyes and tanned skin, wearing matching coats over their different outfits. Felix wore a low cut, striped top and breeches instead of his sister's tunic and tights beneath a short violet skirt, but apart from that and the sword strapped to his waist, he and his sister seemed to have a similar sense of fashion.

"If it helps any, I think we got the coats as a package deal." Felix offered, waving the arm that he wasn't using to hold his tome around. "So that's why those match – for the most part. Solna hacked the hood off of hers."

"So excuse me for hating having my hair trapped against the back of my neck." Solna huffed, playfully pouting at her brother around Chrom. "Unlike you, Felix, I can't keep my hair short! It looks like a bird nested in it – and it's so thick that even pulling it up like this makes it hard to wear a hood ..."

Chrom just started laughing at the two, shaking his head. "Well! At the least, there's no denying you two are siblings." He said with a laugh. "Gods know how many times I've bickered like that with Lissa."

"Not my fault you're always breaking stuff!" Lissa shot back at her older brother, turning around to huff and cross her arms at him. Chrom just groaned at that.

"Lissa, *must* you always bring that up in front of every new person we meet?" He grumbled, huffing and letting a hand rest on the hilt of his sword.

"Considering that you even get *Emm* mad when you do so, yes!" The blonde retorted. "We don't want you breaking any of their valuables, now do we?" Chrom inhaled sharply, as if to respond,

but was cut off by Frederick letting out a relieved sigh – it appeared the knight had tuned out the casual conversation, and was looking out over a large city that sprawled out a short ways in front of them.

"It seems that the capital was spared the chaos." The brunet male said, turning in his saddle to the group of four on foot. "We should be there in time to catch the market opening for the day … and fetch meals other than bear jerky."

Solna gave him a wolfish grin at the last part. "Aww, what's the matter, Frederick?" She began, walking towards Frederick's horse. "Felix, Chrom and I didn't eat it all – go ahead and grab some if you want it." Offering the bag, the wolfish grin didn't slip from the woman's face as Frederick's face contorted momentarily, leaning away from the bag like he expected a rat to pop out of it.

"No offense taken, but I'd rather have something a bit more … filling in my stomach." He replied, settling himself and putting on a more fitting air. He was met with a cocked eyebrow, Solna's grin growing wicked.

"You don't like bear meat, do you, Freddy-bear?"

Frederick opted to glare at her, urging his horse into a mild trot. Solna opted to laugh and store the jerky away, following him. Chrom let out an amused sigh as he followed, Lissa falling into Solna's spot a moment later. Felix hadn't looked up from his tome yet, somehow managing to keep pace with the other two while reading. "... What all is in that tome?"

"To my surprise, forging notes." Felix replied, turning a page. "It's my handwriting too, along with some rough sketches and what looks like a list of people I once made farming tools and some basic weaponry from. Mostly farming tools though ..." Biting back a sigh, he ran a hand through his light blue hair. "... And it looks like I was helping my mother with something … if the notes on the last page are any hint, whatever happened to me and Solna did so when we went to get something to help her."

"Nothing more conclusive than that, though?" Chrom frowned, giving the other male a pat on the shoulder. When Felix shook his head, Chrom sighed. "That's … gods, I can't even begin to guess how frustrating that has to be, knowing something's missing but not being able to put your finger on it ..." Lissa gave both of them a sad look, gripping the staff she had retrieved from Frederick at some point during the walk.

"Well … maybe if we just gave it some time?" She offered, blue-green eyes brightening a bit. "I mean, it's only been a day at most since we found you and Solna, so it might just take a bit longer for you to remember everything." Felix seemed to ponder that for a moment before nodding, a small smile crossing his face.

"Yeah, that sounds like a smart idea … Food will probably help a great deal too." He admitted with a laugh, hearing his stomach let out a faint growl. Chrom and Lissa just shook their heads in amusement, the three of them picking up the pace to catch up with Solna and Frederick.

Ylisstol's streets were crowded and happy, various people stopping and chatting with the vendors out in the market square. Children playing ran through the wider streets, dogs barking at their heels as they kept watch. Scattered around the streets seemed to be women in white uniforms and golden armor, talking casually with the citizens from atop the backs of winged horses.

"Woah … this place certainly feels nice and homey." Felix commented as they walked along the main road, a meat and potato-filled pastry in one hand. The group of five had entered the town easily, and had come across a dumpling vendor first to purchase their makeshift breakfast. Chrom

and Solna had grabbed two a piece, with Lissa having a much smaller one. Frederick had purchased himself one, but also a few carrots for his mount, who seemed content with being led through the street.

"Everyone's relaxed too! That earthquake must have just been in the forest, thank goodness" Lissa commented with a laugh, grinning. "It's a really nice place … provided you don't get lost if you don't know where you're going." Chrom laughed, and went to respond to his sister's statement when a commotion up ahead made the group stop. A large procession seemed to be crossing ahead in one of the larger plazas, more of the women in white and gold armor on winged horses marching behind a lone figure in green and white.

"Look, the Exalt has come to see us!" An old man called out from near the group, walking forward towards the figure in the green robe. Shielding his eyes with a hand, Felix peered in closer – he could just faintly make out the appearance of a young woman in the green cloak, golden hair parted to fall to either side of her neck in a mass of curls. A golden, halo-like crown rested behind her head, and she waved gently to the people that came to greet her.

"The Exalt's your ruler, yes?" He asked, turning to Frederick. The brunet gave a nod, watching the procession with a protective eye.

"Aye; Lady Emmeryn is her name." Frederick responded. Solna seemed curious at that, arching an eyebrow as she looked at Chrom and Lissa once more. Felix didn't pay much attention to his sister's actions, instead giving Frederick a concerned look.

"Is it safe for her to be walking around like that? Even with a guard?"

"The exalt is a symbol of peace—Ylisse's most prized quality." The knight replied, shaking his head and relaxing a fraction. "Long ago, at the dawn of our age, the Fell Dragon tried to destroy the world. But the first exalt joined forces with the Divine Dragon and laid the beast low. Exalt Emmeryn reminds us all of the peace we fought for then."

"With all the bandits and Plegia poking at our borders, she's a calming presence." Chrom added, smiling as he finished his second dumpling. "With her making walks like this frequently, there's less people calling for war; everyone trusts her to keep a war from breaking out."

"I see." Felix gave an understanding nod as he relaxed, smiling. "Then the Ylissean people are lucky to have her."

Lissa let out a laugh, grinning from ear to ear. "She's also the best big sister anyone could ask for!" She chirruped. Solna snapped her fingers, letting out a noise of understanding as she pointed at Chrom.

"So *that's* why your name sounded familiar!" She said as the others turned to her, confused. "And I was *wondering* who that 'Emm' person Lissa mentioned earlier was." Felix's eyes widened, looking between Chrom and Lissa in confusion.

"W-wait, the Exalt's your sister!?" He yelped, pointing at them both. "That means you're –"

"The prince and princess of the realm, correct." Frederick nodded, a wry smile coming across his face.

"But you said you were shepherds!" Felix protested, throwing his hands up in the air, almost dropping his half-eaten pastry. "And plus, barring the strange cape, Chrom doesn't really strike me as a noble! No offense, sire."

Chrom shook his head and waved it off with a laugh, grinning. "None taken, and please, don't

bother with the sire stuff; I've never been one for formalities. And we are shepherds, in a sense … we just have a lot of sheep." He chuckled the entire time, watching Solna as she circled him to stare at his bare shoulder. The lavender-haired woman poked at the mark there, a darker tone against his skin. "Yes, Solna?"

"Oh nothing, just feel kinda stupid for not figuring it out sooner – that's the mark of the Exalt, right?" She asked, to which Chrom nodded. "... Yeah, now I feel dense."

"You mean that's not just a tattoo?" Felix seemed even more baffled, actually dropping his pastry in surprise. "I mean, it's probably a silly thing to think in hindsight, but I mean – *Solna* has tattoos! Is it so strange for me to make that leap of logic?"

"No, but it does make you seem *very* silly, dear brother." Solna laughed, earning a scowl from Felix as Chrom and Lissa both giggled. A second later, however, Felix groaned.

"But if you two are royalty … Gods, I drew a sword on the prince and princess's retainer!"

"To give you massive amounts of credit, you did not strike." Frederick pointed out, glancing back at the procession – Emmeryn had knelt down to greet several children that had run up to her, smiling the whole time. Returning his gaze to Felix, he gave him a wry smile. "Besides, it was noble of you to protect your younger sister."

"Solna's the older twin, actually." Felix countered automatically.

"And you're being semantical; we're a half hour apart." Solna rolled her eyes. "The point of the matter is you're not in trouble, so please stop being the exalt of dramaland."

Felix just kicked the remains of his dropped pastry at his sister.

Ylisstol castle was a grand structure both inside and out, the interior a pale golden color with marble floors. Felix and Solna looked around in awe as they followed Chrom, Lissa, and Frederick, hurriedly finishing off their dumplings – Solna had forked over her second one to Felix after they had started walking towards the castle. Up ahead of the group was Emmeryn, talking with a pale-haired, red-eyed woman in uniform before she spotted the group's approach. A smile crossed her face, and she turned to them. "Welcome home, Chrom, Lissa." She said, voice gentle. "And it is good to see you too, Frederick. How fared you all?"

Chrom gave his older sister the most relaxed smile either twin had seen. "Well, we certainly won't have bandit problems. Our people are safe, but Southtown is in need of some aid – we caught bandits from Plegia putting the place to torch. Nobody was injured, mercifully enough."

The woman beside Emmeryn gave Chrom a crisp bow. "Forgive me, Milord; I should have asked my Pegasus Knights to patrol that border more frequently." She said, voice formal and commanding. Chrom just shook his head.

"No, it's alright, Phila; your place is here, helping the Exalt." He reassured the woman, before shifting slightly to let Emmeryn and her companion get a good look at the twins. "Besides, these two were a great help – they made sure to help keep the citizens safe." Felix and Solna both snapped to attention, both twins executing bows of greeting at the same time. "... Alright, perhaps you two *are* twins ..." The sapphire-haired male said as he shook his head before turning back to Emmeryn. "They're Felix and Solna, twins that Lissa, Frederick and I found in the fields outside of Southtown. They helped fight off the brigands quite bravely, without being asked; I've decided to make them Shepards."

Emmeryn gave the twins a soft smile, Felix meeting her gaze – her eyes seemed more green than Lissa's, but he didn't feel anything but gentleness from them. "Well then, Felix and Solna, it seems we owe you a debt."

Flushing, Felix rapidly shook his head. "N-not at all, milady!" He replied, trying to keep a grip on his composure. Solna seemed to fair better, giving another bow.

"If anything, we owe your brother a debt, milady. Who knows where the two of us would have gone if he hadn't found us out there." She replied, nodding at Chrom. A frown crossed Frederick's face, and he cleared his throat.

"What has not been said, however, is that we are not aware of where they originated. Their memories seem to be quite spotty, as if they're inflicted with amnesia, and Lissa mentioned them both sporting severe injuries." He said once Emmeryn had shifted her gaze to him. "While the two of them seem to hold no ill-will, I cannot personally rule out the possibility of them having been bandits … let alone Plegian spies."

Solna and Chrom both shot Frederick a glare. Not wanting to risk his sister's mouth getting them into trouble, Felix elbowed her. "Frederick's right – we really don't remember much of anything, save for fleeting memories of our mother, but I highly doubt we'd been sent to spy on anyone. Walking around in broad daylight and making no attempts to hide ourselves is unlikely to be the norm for such endeavors."

"And Chrom brought you to the castle." Emmeryn added, voice still serene. "My brother has good instincts if nothing else." Her gaze shifted to Chrom, who seemed to pick up on the unspoken question.

"Both of them risked their lives for our people without question – Solna even knocked me out of the way of a mage's attack." He told his sister, smiling. "That's good enough for me."

Emmeryn nodded, her smiling growing a fraction. "If they have earned such faith from you, Chrom, then it is only fair that I offer them my own as well." The Exalt gave Frederick a polite smile as well. "But, I do thank you for your vigilance, Frederick. I hope Chrom and Lissa are thankful for such a tireless guardian."

"They express something akin to gratitude, from time to time." Frederick's response was followed by a slap from Lissa, which the knight ignored. Solna bit laugh a laugh at both the statement and Lissa's reaction, which earned her a glare from Frederick. Emmeryn seemed amused.

"At the least, you seem to have found someone who isn't intimidated by you." She remarked, earning an eyeroll from Frederick.

"To be quite frank, I am quite certain there are dragons who wouldn't intimidate Solna." The brunet knight replied, giving the lavender-haired woman a sharp look.

"If it makes you feel any better, the thought of your armor turning into scales and you breathing fire is quite entertaining. … And fitting." Solna shot back, earning a groan from Felix as he buried his face in his hands.

"Gods, Solna, what am I going to do with you ..."

"Now you know why I thought you were the older twin." Chrom patted his friend on the shoulder before turning to his sister and Phila once more. "But, back to more pressing business, Phila, has word reached you about any ash-faced monstrosities?"

Phila gave a nod, mouth turning into a tight frown. "Yes I have; several of my best squads came

into conflict with them over the past twelve hours. None of them have fallen yet, but we should still be diligent in stopping them before they become too much of a threat. We do not need such foul creatures running about with Plegia poking at our borders."

"We were about to hold council. Chrom, if you and Frederick would join us?" Emmeryn's question earned a nod from Chrom, and ended the glaring competition between Solna and Frederick as the knight nodded, stepping towards Chrom. Lissa took the moment to slip between the twins, grabbing each of them by an arm.

"That's our cue!" She grinned, starting to drag them off. "We'll see you later, Chrom! I'll show the twins to the rest of the group." Chrom laughed and waved at his sister as she took off with the twins in tow, not giving them a chance to fight back.

About twenty minutes later, Lissa had lead Felix and Solna to a large, wooden building just outside of Ylisstol's city limits. A couple of horses were kept in a picketed piece of land nearby, which turned out to be Sully's grey horse alongside an unfamiliar bay when the trio were close enough to look. Lissa didn't hesitate, letting go of the twin's hands to run up to the double doors at the front. Turning around, she grinned. "Well, here we are! Hopefully everyone will be here to meet you." She said, beaming.

"... Here we are, but ..." Solna began, frowning. "Where *are* we, exactly?"

Lissa's grin only grew more, and she spun around to grab the door handles. "The Shepherds' garrison!"

Pulling the doors open with a surprising amount of strength, the blonde princess smiled as she turned back around to see the stunned looks on the twins' faces. Giggling, she reached out and grabbed their arms again, and tugged them into the building before they regained enough of their senses to walk normally while looking around.

The 'garrison', as Lissa had called it, was large on the inside, the main hallway sporting two that branched out a short way out of the entry hall. A glance down them showed several doors, some open while others remained shut, potentially sleeping quarters or such for the group. The main hall continued to a second set of double doors, banners boasting the standard of the haildom hanging from the walls. Windows of all sizes let in the light, some of them propped open to let in a cool breeze.

Shutting the doors, Lissa grinned and headed for the double doors down the hall. "C'mon, if the others are here, most of them are probably in the mess hall." She said with a grin. "I can give you two the grand tour later, but for now, let's get you guys settled in and introduced to people!" To their credit, neither Solna or Felix seemed worried as Lissa nudged one of the new doors open, letting them enter the mess hall.

Various long tables filled the room, covered with various tomes and papers, along with the random weapon here and there. Right away, the twins noticed a tanned, blond man in leather armor, breeches and boots leaning back in one chair, grinning as he talked to a young, brunette woman in maroon clothes as she set about sharpening a spear. A large man sat some distance away in orange-accented plate armour, eating quietly, as if the others didn't notice his presence. All three of them looked up as the door opened, watching Lissa and the twins as the princess led the newcomers to the center of the room.

"Ah here we are!" She said, turning to Felix and Solna once more while grinning. "Home away from home! It's nice enough, really."

"Lissa, my treasure!" A new, feminine voice made Solna blink and step aside as a pink and yellow blur shot past, forming into a blonde woman in pink clothes tackling Lissa. To the princess's credit, she didn't fall over from the force of the tackle, instead catching her unseen assailant as the three who had presently been seated got up and approached.

"Oh, hey, Maribelle!" Lissa chirped happily as the pink-clad girl stood up straight, earning a huffed look from the other.

"'Oh, hey' yourself!" 'Maribelle' replied in a huff, patting Lissa over as she did a walk around, as if looking for any injuries. "I've sprouted fourteen grey hairs fretting over you!"

Felix leaned into Solna, elbowing her lightly. "... I thought Lissa had Frederick for a nanny." He muttered in his twin's ear, earning a jab to the ribs as Solna snorted in amusement. Nobody else seemed to have heard, as Lissa just laughed and gripped her friend's shoulder.

"Aw, you worry too much. I'm fine!" She reassured the other blonde, grinning. "Although, I could have done without the bugs and the bear barbecue ..." She groaned as an afterthought, shaking her head. Maribelle looked ready to fret more when the tanned man opened his mouth.

"Heya, squirt, where's Chrom?" He asked, grinning and stepping forward more. "I bet he had trouble out there without Teach and his trusty axe!" Lissa opted to roll her eyes, turning to Vaike while the large man in armour wandered off.

"So you're 'Teach' now, Vaike?" She queried, propping her hands on her hips. "Hehe, and here I thought people were just born lacking wits – I didn't know it could be taught!"

It was Solna's turn to lean in to her twins ear. "I'd say Frederick's a horrible influence on her, either way." Felix, in turn, jabbed his sister in the ribs, fighting off laughter as a smile crossed his face. Maribelle seemed to have noticed, as she turned to the twins in confusion.

"Hah, you can count on Vaike!" Vaike seemed to miss the jab, laughing for a good moment before pausing. "Wait ..." Before he could say any more, the brunette had cleared her throat.

"Beg pardon, but when will we see the Captain again?" She asked, drawing Maribelle's attention to her. The pink-clad girl shook her head in amusement.

"Poor Sumia." She said, smiling at the brunette. "She's been besides herself with concern. Her eyes kept scanning the horizon during practice this morning; she might have earned fewer bruises blindfolded!"

The newly named Sumia fretted a bit, a trace of pink shooting across her face. "W-well, he's our Captain and the prince! I can't help but worry."

"Aww, that's sweet of you, Sumia~" Lissa giggled, joining in with Maribelle's giggles. The large man in armour reappeared at that point, carrying a couple of drinks. He looked ready to set them down on the table when Felix and Solna each held out a hand in offering, clearly catching him off guard – the drinks were still handed over with a smile, the large man walking off just a short ways as Vaike turned to the twins.

"Huh? Lissa, who're the strangers?" He asked, bringing attention back to the twins. Lissa grinned and skipped over to them, bouncing to one side and gesturing to them with both arms.

"Tadaaaaaa~ Let me introduce the newest Shepherds!" She grinned, eyes bright as she pointed at Felix. "This is Felix, and the lovely giantess over there is his twin sister, Solna."

Solna made a noise in protest as she took a sip of the drink given to her. "Hey, I'm not *that* tall!"

She pouted, only to pause and look at Felix. "I'm not, am I?"

Lissa gave her a flat look. "Solna, if I stood right against you, I could use your chest as a *pillow."* The blonde princess deadpanned.

"It makes her easy to keep track of in a crowd, at least." Felix piped up, grinning at the way his twin hit him with the hand not holding her drink. "Don't mind her, she … tends to forget she's that tall compared to other women; we think it's just a thing from us being twins."

"Knowing you two, it wouldn't be surprising." Lissa laughed before shaking her head and grinning. "Anyway, we ran into these two around Southtown, and Chrom's elected to make them our tacticians. You should see all the tricks they have up their sleeves!" Grinning and giggling, she turned to the twins, who once again gave their synchronized bow in greeting.

Vaike laughed again. "Tricks, eh? Can either of them do this?" As he finished speaking, the tanned man let out a loud belch. Maribelle looked about ready to hit him in sheer disgust when Solna belched herself. The lavender-haired woman rapidly covered her mouth when the others looked at her, the tall woman's face a vibrant shade of pink.

"I swear to all the gods that was unintentional." She said hurriedly. "I had a lot to eat on the way to Ylisstol." Although Maribelle still seemed a bit put-out, she seemed less likely to blow up at the other woman, instead rounding on Vaike again.

"That was abhorrent!" She scolded, clearly not caring that her head came up to Vaike's shoulder. "Must you baseborn fools fill the air with your buffonery? At least show some tact and mannerisms like our newcomer here!" Gesturing at Solna, Maribelle let out a huff and approached the twins, looking them over. "It's nice to see people cut from finer cloth joining our ranks, although I hope you forgive Vaike for his atrocious manners. I'd love to stay for chitchat, but I must fetch some fresh air after such a vulgar display." The twins watched Maribelle leave, eventually turning back to the others.

"Okay, who got her smallclothes in a knot?" Felix sighed, rubbing his forehead.

"Ah, don't take it to heart." Sumia gigged this time, shaking her head. "Maribelle warms to people slowly."

"Or burns too quickly!" Lissa added with a laugh, grinning. "But yeah, just give her time." Grinning more, she twirled in spot. "Anyway, if you want, we can give you the grand tour while Chrom's still talking with Emm –"

"The tour will have to wait, Lissa." As if summoned by his little sister's voice, Chrom entered the room to stand beside the twins. The blue-haired man grinned at them as Lissa, Sumia and Vaike all focused on him, Sumia's face lighting up a fraction.

"Captain!" She stated as she started moving forward, voice both relieved and happy. Anything else she would have gone to say was cut off as she somehow slipped over what appeared to be nothing, face planting ungraciously onto the wooden floor. Solna arched an eyebrow, walking forward to see what the woman had tripped over while Felix walked over to where the large man in orange armour was now standing.

"So," the male tactician asked, taking another sip of his drink as the armoured man looked down at him, "who're you, and how does everyone else here seem to miss someone of your size in *orange*?"

The large man seemed surprised, but a smile spread over his face and he let out a quiet laugh.

"Heh, it's something I've wondered about for quite some time now myself, but it doesn't seem to work on you," He replied. "Or your sister either, for that matter. I'm a bit surprised, but it's nice to know someone looks my way once in a while." Pausing, he laughed. "Ah, yeah, I'm Kellam."

Felix grinned and nodded. "Alright, Kellam, I'll let Solna know your name too," He began, only to stop when he saw Chrom shift to stand more formally. "... Seems like Chrom has news." Kellam nodded, the two of them focusing on the sapphire-haired prince as a serious look stole over his face.

"Alright, everyone, listen up – we'll be heading out for a march tomorrow morning to Regna Ferox." He announced, earning a curious look from Solna as she finished up the drink that Kellam had handed to her.

"Regna Ferox?" The lavender-haired woman asked, setting the empty mug on the table nearest her. Sumia gave a nod, the brunet woman rubbing her forehead a bit from where she had impacted the hardwood floor.

"A unified country to Ylisse's north." She offered, nodding after she was certain her forehead wasn't bruised. "It's apparently a nation that's populated by barbarians, or so I've heard some of the other Pegasus Knights say."

"A nation populated by warriors is what they are, and we'll need their strength to deal with the new threat that's appeared." Chrom continued, looking around the room. "I assume Sully told everyone here about the strange creatures that we encountered last night, yes?" When he received nods of confirmation, he nodded. "Well, while we don't know exactly *what* they are, the council has decided to call them Risen. If we were just having to deal with them, it wouldn't be a matter of contacting Regna Ferox. But with Plegia poking at our borders ..."

"The Exalt wants a bit extra insurance in case it gets to the point of everyone being overwhelmed." Solna finished with a nod, crossing her arms over her chest. Felix mirrored his sister's pose, nodding.

"And since Plegia's being a nuisance, your sister's worried that her leaving to request aid herself would cause a panic in the populace." He continued, building off of what Solna had started. When Chrom nodded, the twins flashed one another grins. "Well, it's a smart move, from many angles. I doubt Plegia will be willing to cause much of a problem if they find out you have more muscle backing you up."

"Exactly, and since Emm can't leave the capital, the task has fallen to the Sheperds." Chrom nodded and looked around again. "This mission is completely voluntary, so if anyone –"

"I'll volunteer!" Lissa chimed up instantly, grinning.

"Me too; you'll be needing ol' Teach along for such a delicate mission." Vaike gave Chrom a wolfish grin, making Solna shake her head in amusement.

"I'll come along too!" Kellam called out from where he stood beside Felix, who nodded and gave the orange-clad knight a thumbs up.

"Gotcha – I'm sure Solna and I can keep one eye at you to make sure we don't leave you behind." The blue-haired tactician turned away after he spoke, and missed the look of joy that crossed Kellam's face at his statement. Solna seemed to have caught it though, because she also winked and gave the knight a double thumbs up of her own.

"Umm … I ..." Sumia had raised her voice, but everything about her screamed uncertainty. She

was wringing her hands together and had bitten her lower lip, face concerned. "It's just that … I'm not sure I'm quite ready for a proper mission yet. I feel like I'd just get in the way on the battlefield." Chrom gave her a sympathetic look, blue eyes softening.

"Well, you could just stay behind the main group at first, and if a battle is met, just watch and learn?" He suggested, making Sumia's gloomy face brighten a bit. Chrom seemed to notice his suggestion was appealing, because he smiled a bit in support. "It's your choice, of course, but some lessons can only be learned on the battlefield."

"If you think it wise ..." Sumia's voice carried a bit more hope, and Felix gave Solna a look. The lavender-haired twin nodded, examining Sumia during the exchanged. It seemed that the brunette woman was the newest recruit to the Sheperds, barring the twins themselves. Her nerves seemed to stem from that, but the fact that she had tripped over what appeared to be nothing but air was more than likely a factor as well.

Chrom didn't seem to notice such, because he just offered Sumia another smile. "Just stick close to me, and you'll be fine, alright?" The brunette woman seemed to perk right up at that, because she nodded rapidly, smiling broadly.

"Oh, ye – I mean, yes sir, I'll do just that!" Sumia caught herself mid-sentence, but why she corrected herself like she did, the twins couldn't tell. Chrom didn't seem to mind it, letting out a smile and a nod as he looked at both Felix and Solna.

"So, while we're here, let's get you two some rooms. I imagine sleeping in a bed at least once before we head out to march will do you two a few favors." He said, nodding. "If you two don't have anything to fuss over, it's probably a safe bet that we can get you a room picked out to better settle into when we return from Ferox."

"Sully's new friend got settled in as well." Vaike offered, laughing. "Weird guy – Maribelle threatened to dump tea in his ruffles if he kept makin passes at her."

Chrom laughed before looking around. "On the subject of friends, can someone let Stahl know about this? I saw him helping Rosemary settle into the chef's quarters at the castle, but Frederick and I didn't get a chance to flag him down and inform him."

"No need – Sully said herself that she'd run and inform him." Frederick said, announcing his presence as he entered the barracks proper. Virion was with him, looking around the barracks with a critical eye. "For today, we should prepare and stay close to the barracks. We need to make sure that our gear is in good shape for the march."

"And with that, I have a question," Felix spoke up, raising a hand, "is there a forge here?" Silence answered the question as the others all looked at one another in confusion. Uncertain over whether or not this was a good sign or not, Felix continued, "I mean, you talk about keeping up the maintenance on your weapons and armor, so even if there's not a blacksmith here, shouldn't there at least be a forge?"

"Well, I don't think we've ever had a proper blacksmith attached to the Shepherds," Chrom admitted, shaking his head. "I'm certain that there's a room we could convert into a forge for your use, though. Since I assume you wanted to see if that tome of notes is really yours, or just something you got at a discount price with the coat."

"Oh, no, Felix knows how to smith." Solna interrupted, nodding her head. Lissa turned into her in surprise.

"Huh? You remembered that?" The blonde's eyes lit up in excitement. Solna gave her a nod,

offering a shaky smile back.

"Yeah … it's … really kinda fuzzy, but I do remember that – it was part of how we made a living, apart from Mother being the village healer." She admitted, rubbing her head. "And … a wyvern? That's what confuses me the most – why would I remember a wyvern?"

"Perhaps it was your father's?" Sumia offered, tilting her head to one side.

Both twins let out a sigh. "No ..." Solna shook her head, "it was just us and our mother for the most part. Never met our father, so even if our memory wasn't so futzy, I don't think I'd know his face."

Chrom and Lissa both grew solemn at that, but refrained from commenting. Turning back to Felix, Chrom nodded. "Why don't we try and locate a room to serve as a forge, then? It's not likely we'll be able to get it fully up and running before we march in the morning, but at least we can get it established." Felix nodded, waving to Kellam as he and Chrom headed out of the main doors and down one hall.

Sighing when he was sure they couldn't be overheard, Felix gave Chrom a look. "Okay, I don't know how or when Solna and I can pay you back, but –" he began, only to be cut off by Chrom holding a hand up, silencing him.

"Don't worry about it – I never expected you and your sister to pay me back." The prince said, voice firm. "You two were in need of help, so I helped – that's all there is to it. I'm just relieved you two are willing to stick around." Chuckling, Chrom nodded as they reached a new hallway at the end of one of the two main ones, branching off at an angle. "This hallway's where our gear and weapons are stored; if we find a forge – or a room to make into one – it would make the most sense for it to be down here. It's a safe enough distance away from the rest of the barracks to avoid fires."

Felix nodded, looking down the hallway. "Practical – are the main halls sleeping quarters, then?" He asked as they headed down the hall, glancing over his shoulder. When Chrom nodded, the second man gave a nod. "It's probably a safe bet to say that it's segregated by gender, then?"

"Yes, but since you and Solna are siblings, the rules are a bit more lenient." Laughing, Chrom opened a large door on the right. Before him and Felix stood an array of weapons and armour, all sorted neatly on racks and hangars, with the suits of armour supported by mannequins. "This is … well, this is the main armoury. Our mages tend to keep their tomes in their rooms with them, as do the healers." The prince explained with a nod, looking around. "I … don't think we have enough room in here to establish a forge, but at the least, this is where most of what you make would be stored."

"Good to know." Felix nodded as he looked around as well, taking tally. "Everything looks like it's in good condition, at least – I can probably just work on fixing up anything that really needs it before starting up a surplus."

"Haha!" Chrom grinned as they left, heading down the hallway again. "At the least, you're prepared to pitch in where you can, spotty memory or not." At that, he paused, dark blue eyes focusing on Felix's russet ones for a moment. "... That's odd – it just occurred to me that your sister seems to remember more about you than you do." He commented, stopping. "Perhaps the reverse also applies?"

Felix thought for a moment before nodding, voice distant. "Yeah … I *do* remember a few things about Solna; I have no clue where her deal with lightning comes from, but I*do* know the reason behind the wyvern she mentioned." His eyes saddened a bit, shaking his head. "There was a

wyvern courier that visited us often. I … don't remember his name, and his face is fuzzy, but I *do* remember that we knew a wyvern courier."

"That's something, at least." Chrom nodded, resuming his former pace. "And wyvern couriers tend to operate on their own terms, so they're not too uncommon in Ylisstol either." Smiling easily, the prince chuckled. "Perhaps seeing him face to face might jog your memory further."

"Perhaps." Nodding, the other male let out a sigh. "It's still frustrating … but maybe I just need sleep." Walking alongside Chrom, Felix paused as another thought came to him. "Well, there is *one* thing about Solna I recall." Seeing the puzzled look Chrom gave him, the lighter-haired male let out a small laugh. "... She's not allowed to use wind tomes in combat – the last time she tried, she made a localized twister."

"... Well, unfortunately, wind magic's the most common in Ylisse." Chrom sighed. "Let's hope that thunder tome of hers holds out until we can get her another ..."

Over in the mess hall, Solna let out a sneeze while talking with Lissa. "... Felix is probably talking about me again." The lavender-haired woman groaned, shaking her head. Lissa let out a giggle, hopping onto a nearby table to sit.

"Well, isn't that just what brothers do?" The blonde pointed out, swinging her legs back and forth. "Older brothers are *really*bad at that, just saying ..." Groaning, Lissa then launched into another giggle fit. "But at the same time, Chrom's the middle child, *and* the only boy. I suppose he has a bit more leeway to gripe and worry after me and Emm."

"So that .. kinda answers a question I had." Solna said, leaning back against the table Lissa sat at. "It was puzzling me that the Exalt was female, but if Chrom's younger than Emmeryn, it's safe to say that the crown goes to the oldest child then."

"I guess – I'm only turning sixteen in a month, so I couldn't tell you for sure." Lissa shrugged. "Chrom's four years older than me, and Emmeryn's six years older than him ..." Solna let out a low whistle.

"Felix and I are late birthdays – November. We'll turn twenty this year … I think." Laughing weakly, the tactician shook her head and grinned. "So, care to explain how your brother is able to walk around looking like Prince Fashion Disaster?"

Lissa stared at Solna for a long moment before letting out a snort of laughter. She was joined by a more polite laugh, making Solna turn to look at the double doors as Maribelle entered. "Prince *Fashion Disaster?"* The pink-clad blonde repeated, eyes dancing in amusement. "Well, once again, I'm impressed! You even made Lissa laugh at the statement – even if it is, unfortunately, accurate." Seating herself on a nearby bench, she turned a critical pair of red-violet eyes on Solna. "Even though your manner of standing and speech is clearly low-born, you show signs of fitting in quite well with the noble classes."

Solna felt the corner of one eye twitch, but was prevented from answering when Lissa let out a laugh. "You weren't marching with us, Maribelle; she *argues* with Frederick! It's great!" Giggling and snorting again, the other blonde gave Maribelle a broad grin. "Don't worry, Solna's gonna fit right in, aren't you, Solna?"

Distracted, the lavender-haired woman gave a nod. "Y – yeah, here's hoping. I … really don't have a clue what I'm good at outside of tactics and verbal spars, though, so I might be a bit out of place when we're not marching and such ..."

"Pish-posh!" Maribelle scoffed, bopping Solna on the shoulder with the frilly white parasol that

had been hooked over her elbow earlier. "I'm certain that we can find something for a woman of such imposing stature to do in her downtime – perhaps you have a knack for something more artistic?"

"... I draw like a crippled cat."

"Wait a minute, didn't you have that weird flute in your pocket?" Lissa pointed out through her snickers, making Solna blink. A second later, she was digging through her coat's inner pockets, eventually pulling the instrument out. Maribelle arched an eyebrow.

"That's an ocarina, Lissa dear." She corrected, her voice far nicer to Lissa than Solna had heard before. "And it's certainly unexpected – those are fairly delicate instruments. Not exactly something one would typically find in the hands of someone who seems as … un-delicate as you, Solna."

"If you wanna see the opposite of delicate, look at Felix." Solna shrugged, turning the ocarina over in her fingers – it felt like ceramic, and was painted with little white and pink flowers on a black base coat. "If I'm not delicate, I shudder to imagine what you'd think of him being a blacksmith." Maribelle blinked at that.

"Your brother looks so slender, how can he even lift a hammer?!"

"By picking it up, obviously." Felix's voice at the double doors made all three girls look, Solna bursting into a fit of laughter. Her twin had discarded his coat at some point, and had the battered remains of a war hammer slung over one shoulder. "Oi, Solna, mind lending a hand? Chrom and I found a spare room that has a chimney and a good space to put a forge in, but we need help cleaning the room."

"Can I get the hammer?" Solna gestured at the weapon as she took off her own coat as well, tucking the ocarina back in the pocket.

"After I fix it up, sis." Felix shrugged, nodding as he waved to Lissa and Maribelle. "Sorry to interrupt girl-talk, but needed more help." He called as he walked off, Solna following him a moment later.

Lissa just laughed, shaking her head. "Yup, those two are gonna settle in juuust fine." She said aloud, smiling. A glance at Maribelle's face – as if expecting commentary from her friend – just made Lissa laugh harder; the other blonde's face had an unreadable expression on it, as if she was having difficulty comprehending what she had just witnessed.

Walking down to the forge, Felix turned to Solna and grinned. "So, think we'll be okay here?" He asked his twin, brushing light blue hair out of his face. "Yeah, I know we don't know much of anything, or even remember where we came from, but it seems like we've made friends already ..." Solna gave a smile and a nod, laughing a bit.

"It's odd, huh? Maybe we can figure out more ..." Stretching her arms, she let a wolfish grin spread across her face. "Heh, even if we don't remember anything else, at least we can make new memories from here on out and build from there, right?" Felix smiled as a confused look filled his eyes.

"... Have you always been so philosophical?" He asked, clearly amused. Solna responded with a shrug, and the two entered the soon-to-be forge with a laugh.

This Doesn't Involve Sheep

Chapter Summary

Author: Mags

"HEEEEY! W-wait for me!"

The Shepherds stopped and turned towards the sound of the voice as they made their final preparations to march, a winded man in green armor scurrying towards the group.

"Stahl?" Chrom asked, looking more than passingly confused. "Why are you in rush?"

"The better question is why am I the last to hear about this expedition to Ferox!" retorted the brunet. "I had to skip out on half of my breakfast..."

Lissa frowned. "How didn't you know about it? Vaike was supposed..." Her hair swayed as her head span towards the blond axeman. "Vaike! Did you forget to tell Stahl about our mission?!"

"The Vaike never forgets!" he retorted, sounding offended. "I just thought you weren't gonna drag him along since he just got back!"

Fredrick's head bobbed lightly, as if to agree with Vaike. "I'd assumed much the same when he hadn't arrived with the others. Even Kellam was more punctual..."

"I told you about the march yesterday!" snapped Sully, approaching the other knight and lightly smacking him on the back of the head. "Or were you too caught up with your dinner to pay attention!?"

"Well, the day has certainly gotten off to a lively start." Solna quipped as she pulled on her coat. "Or is this normal?"

"A little of both, really." replied Kellam as he put on the last of his armor. "...Huh. That's odd..."

"What's odd?"

"I don't see Miriel anywhere." he said. "By now she'd be lecturing Vaike about keeping track of-"

"Perhaps the next time you misplace your axe, I'll use a spell to permanently fasten it to your hands!"

The loud voice drew Solna's attention, revealing a woman with red hair clad in black robes giving the muscular blond a very stern lecture that he clearly seemed to be dreading every second of. Her voice was a steady, if loud, tone, but she spoke so quickly it was hard to process.

"Nevermind." Kellam chuckled.

At another part of the soon to depart army, Felix sighed and stood up, offering a breastplate back to its owner.

"There you are, Sumia." He said, a pleasant smile on his face. "Good as new."

"Oh, thank you!" She said, inspecting the armor carefully. "You removed that entire gash...?! That's... that's amazing...!"

He chuckled softly, waving his hand dismissively. "Hardly. It came naturally, so I've clearly done that sort of thing before. Just make sure you grab a weapon before we march."

"I-I will!" replied Sumia, hurrying off to put the armor on a moment later.

"I should retrieve my own as well..." he said aloud, walking over to where he'd set the Levin sword and attaching the blade's sheath to his belt. "...A spare wouldn't hurt, though..."

With a hum, he checked amongst the various crates, withdrawing a bronze sword and a tome of fire from them.

-That should work.- He thought confidently, putting another scabbard on his belt before he headed off to meet up with Chrom.

A short while, and more yelling by Miriel, later, and the Shepherds set off from Yisstol, boots, hooves, and wagon wheels heading north towards the warrior realm of Ferox. The faint clanking of metal was the only sound among them for a time, till at last Stahl spoke up.

"So uh... who're the new faces?" he asked, looking over at Solna and Felix from atop his horse. "New recruits nobody mentioned?"

Sully let out a frustrated groan at that comment, and because of her shoving Virion away, and turned towards the cavalier in green. "Gods Stahl, I know you love Rosemary's cooking but would it kill you to actually LISTEN when someone's talking to you?!"

"Maybe it's a trait common among men?" Solna offered. "Felix tends to zone out while eating too..."

"That was last night and I was reading at the same time!" he retorted, elbowing his sister.

She simply elbowed him back. "Doesn't help your case."

Miriel adjusted her spectacles, her stride edging her closer to the conversation. "I am likewise unfamiliar with the two, though I would infer they are the tacticians that Sir Fredrick spoke of. I am Miriel, scholar and mage of the Shepherds."

"I'm Stahl." added the man himself, a friendly grin on his face. "Sorry for the poor first impression. I kinda just got back from my honeymoon..."

"Ah, so the 'Rosemary' Sully spoke of is your wife then?"

His smile widened. "Yep! Head chef at the castle, too." A wistful sigh escaped him. "She's an amazing woman..."

"Well, congratulations." said Solna, managing a bow as she walked backwards. "The name's Solna. The one with ice for hair and his nose in a book is my brother."

"Felix." he added, looking over his shoulder.

Stahl's expression shifted into something close to a confused frown. "...I'll be honest, I'd expect the

name 'Solna' on someone with hair like Miriel or Maribelle's."

"I feel like I've had that said to me fairly often..." she turned towards Felix. "...Have I?"

"Most likely, sister."

A chuckle escaped Sully. "Sounds like whichever parent named you had odd taste in naming conventions... and maybe a good fascination with irony."

"Or a lot of love for their kid." Vaike commented. "Y'know, like sayin' your daughter is your ray of sunshine."

Sully, Stahl, and Miriel stared at the blond in silence for a few moments.

"...What?" he asked. "The Vaike calls it like he sees it."

"Heh, I like that interpretation better than the alternative." Solna laughed. "Especially when said alternative is a lot of sunlight puns."

Stahl cocked an eyebrow. "What'd you do to people who made puns?"

"Punch them." stated Felix, turning the page in his tome. "The worse the pun, the harder she hit them."

"...Is it common for you to speak for your sister?" asked Miriel.

"It is when I can remember more about my brother than I can about myself." Solna sighed. "Quite frustrating, to say the least..."

The redheaded mage adjusted her glasses again. "Most curious... though I suppose familial bonds would be more than capable of withstanding a bought of amnesia. Which of you is the older child?"

"Solna, by thirty minutes. We're twins."

"...Fascinating."

"Oh hells, I know that look..." said Sully. "She's got some experiments brewing in that head of hers now."

Miriel scoffed lightly. "Nothing barbaric, oh Crimson Mistress of War. Memory is an important part of one's life, and to lose it is to lose yourself. Is it wrong of me to humbly request an opportunity to aid our new allies?"

"Well spoken, my lady. Perhaps when you are- OOF!"

"...I was not aware we also attained a bard." quipped the mage as Virion staggered from Sully's kick. "Another admirer of yours?"

"You could say that..." answered the knight. "More useful than the others. Feel free to use him as a test subject if you need one for those concoctions you brew up... unless it's that blue one you were working on last time. I liked that one."

Solna let out a cackle as the blue-haired archer seemed to pale. "Oh good, so I'm not the only eccentric one around~"

"Maybe if she can help with our memories she can find out why you liked using that Thunder

tome so much..." Felix deadpanned.

"I brought something else along this time, twerp." she griped, adjusting her coat enough to reveal the sword she had belted to her waist. "Sure I've still got that Thunder tome, but now I have another option if I need it."

"A sound plan... though I'm curious as to where Chrom attained his blade." said the blue haired twin, looking at the man in question as he spoke with Fredrick closer to the front of the group. "It's certainly unique..."

Solna hummed. "Yeah... though I wonder what it's made of. I saw him blocking more than a few attacks with it looking no more worse for ware..."

"That's Falchion, one of the treasures of House Ylisse."

The twins both turned towards the speaker, who turned out to be Sumia.

"It's been passed down the Exalted line for generations, even as far back as the Hero-King Marth." she continued. "Supposedly it has only ever been broken once, but was reforged to be stronger."

"...And here I was about to consider scolding him for such blatant mistreatment of a weapon." commented Felix.

"Only you would, Felix... though I'm more amazed you know so much about it, Sumia." said Solna. "Of course, I suppose it would be odd for someone from Ylisse to have never heard of such a thing..."

The brunette giggled nervously, a light blush coloring her face. "O-oh, well, I've read my fair share of books and a bit more... some friends among the Pegasus Knights helped, too..."

"Oh yeah, you're good friends with that one prodigy among them..." Stahl commented absently. "...Cordelia's her name, right?"

"Yes! She's a really nice person." Sumia beamed. "I think the praise bothers her a bit, though..."

"Sounds like an entertaining collection of people." said Solna. "I'd like to meet her given the chance, though I suppose that'd have to wait till after we're done with business in Ferox."

Felix bobbed his head in agreement. "Likewise."

"Sounds like you've both made some good first impressions."

"Ha, 'bout time you stopped yammering with Ol' Fred and spent time with Teach!" Vaike laughed as Chrom moved his pace more in line with the small, chattering group. "That stick in the mud wouldn't know a good time if it bit him."

"...Is that so, 'Teach'?"

The axeman's face lightened a shade as he noticed Frederick had also joined the conversation, standing on the opposite side of the group from Chrom.

"I-I mean that yer real diligent is all!" he said quickly. "I gotta be the counterpoint, y'know? All work and no play makes a dull life and such!"

The knight arched an eyebrow, a knowing smirk curling its way onto his lips. "Then perhaps

you'd best work on your own diligence in the art of merry making instead of criticizing another man's lifestyle."

"Aww, Freddy-bear, do you have to be a killjoy so soon into the march?" Solna asked, a mock pouting tone to her voice.

Frederick's eye twitched, though he did not respond to the jab. The others present, however, seemed taken aback.

"...'Freddy-bear'?" inquired Stahl, trying his best to not burst into laughter. Sully was doing a better job than him at it, as was Miriel.

"She's convinced he doesn't like the taste of bear meat." stated Felix. "Though it's far from the worst nickname she could have concocted."

"I'll say, but damn... you got some nerve if you're makin' jabs at Frederick the Fearless!"

Solna merely smiled, a pleased hum escaping her. "I don't scare easy."

"...I'm not sure if I should be enamored or terrified." Virion said, inching slightly closer to Vaike. "Unless both is an acceptable compromise..."

"Ha! Teach likes her style already." laughed the blond. "Gotta wonder what else she'd cook up, though."

"I'd imagine Lissa would say something to the tune of 'nothing edible' in that case, Vaike, given Solna's reaction to having bear meat for a meal." Chrom chuckled. "Unless cooking is another hidden talent of yours..."

This time, both twins shrugged.

"Couldn't tell you if it was." they said in unison.

"...I won't lie, it's creepy seeing you two do that."

Felix and Solna blinked in confusion, looking at each other before turning their gazes back to Chrom.

"Do what?" they asked.

"Sire!" called out a soldier who was hurrying towards the front of the march from further down the path. "An enemy force has been spotted ahead. It appears to be comprised of the creatures we were instructed to be wary of."

The sapphire haired swordsman scowled. "Gods, the Risen have spread this far already?!"

"...Risen?"

"A name was needed to describe this new threat." Frederick stated evenly, hoisting his silvered lance. "The council gave them one fitting for their... uncanny similarity to tales of the walking dead."

Miriel adjusted her glasses as she withdrew a red-covered tome from the bag she carried. "They perish like all else as Sully attested to. A shame of the account on their demise... it would be a boon indeed to study one to find a swifter way to dispose of them."

"Well, maybe you can come up with one while we fight them." Stahl offered. "They might even

have a weak point you could find."

A faint, sinister grin curled its way onto the mage's lips. "Fieldwork is not something I enjoy, but I have been known to make exceptions for extraneous circumstances. It seems now shall be one such instance, and in earnest."

"Then perhaps a more mobile perch would suit such an endeavor." offered Frederick, extending a hand to Miriel. "Gods know there is strength in numbers."

"Indeed." she replied, accepting his offer and climbing onto the back of his warhorse. "I shall see to keeping stray magics from causing undo harm in exchange for your assistance."

"Splendid."

Virion picked up his pace slightly, doing his best to strike a flamboyant pose as he strode along beside Sully's horse.

"If it would please my lady, I would be-"

"Hey, Solna. Hop on."

The archer's expression fell instantly as the lavender-haired woman was pulled onto the horse behind the redheaded knight.

"Ruffles, if you wanna help out, cover Vaike." stated Sully, pointing her thumb at the blond. "If ya both make it through this in one piece, you can hitch a ride if we find more of these things."

He glanced sadly at Vaike, a fire springing up in his eyes as he looked back at Sully. "I swear I shall not disappoint you!"

"Keep telling yourself that."

"...That's actually not a bad idea." Felix noted as Sully's horse trotted closer to the front of the formation. "Vaike doesn't have any throwing axes with him – but if he sticks close to you, then he can easily crush any enemies who get too close while you rain arrows on the others."

Virion hummed. "I see... and with my ample skills, I would be able to slay foes who attempted to slay him."

"Heh, Teach can work with that." chuckled Vaike. "Sounds like class is in session now!"

"Class indeed!" said the archer, his eyes lighting up once more. "The lesson shall be one of how to smite foes with both power and cunning!"

Stahl seemed more than a little concerned by his turn of events as he helped Lissa onto the back of his horse. "And here I thought I'd never see someone sound genuine while going along with Vaike's antics..."

"Hey, if it keeps them outta trouble, then whatever works!" said the princess. "And Felix, just gimme a shout if you need some help!"

"Is you riding along with Stahl a common practice?"

She nodded with a grin. "Yep! Kinda hard to kill a knight when he's got a healer right there with him, to say nothing of a little heal and run for the others!"

"Simple yet effective." chuckled the green-armored knight. "Hasn't failed us yet, after all."

"Then by all means, keep at it." said the blue haired man before he trotted over to Chrom. "It seems I'll get my wish to see your sword up close..."

Chrom chuckled. "Not as close as the Risen will, at least. Come, there's not sense in keeping them waiting."

Felix nodded, looking back at Kellam as Chrom picked up the pace.

"Just stick as close as you can." he said. "We're not exactly wearing full plate like you are, so I'll be relying in you to help intercept enemies."

A confident smile appeared on the orange knight's face. "Gladly."

"Frederick, can you see the enemy?"

"That I can." he responded. "At a distance, there appears to be not but martial foot soldiers, though a mage or archer could easily be hiding amongst the ranks."

Solna hummed as she repositioned herself on the back of Sully's horse. "In that case... Vaike, Stahl, your groups should come with me and Sully. If everyone else goes with Felix, we can strike from both flanks and crush survivors between us."

"It also means their only escape is to retreat, and the cavaliers can run them down if they try." added Felix.

"Sounds like we have our strategy then." said Chrom. "Move out! Don't leave a single Risen standing!"

Hearty laughter from Vaike and Sully was his response as they started towards the left side of the enemy formation, the others following Frederick to the right. The Risen's moaning growls filled the air as the abominations shambled forwards, swords, lances, and axes in hand.

"As ghastly as Sully described..." Miriel said, readying her tome. "I dare not dream what could have created them."

"Aye, 'tis better that way." stated Frederick, lance arm poised to strike at a moments notice.

A Risen soldier let loose a more aggressive growl before rushing at the knight, two others following him. The first was summarily trampled under the hooves of Frederick's warhorse, the second having a lance run through the small gap between his neck and left shoulder, and the third set ablaze by Miriel's magic. Two of the risen melted away in purple mist, while the one who'd been stabbed flailed his sword at the knight to little effect, earning another stab and dissolving for their troubles.

"Hold a moment."

Frederick looked over his shoulder as Miriel climbed off the horse, withdrawing a vial from a pouch on her belt and inspecting the ground where the Risen had fallen. A moment later, and she'd managed to fill the vial with what looked like a liquid version of the mist the creatures became when they died.

"A sufficient sample." she said, placing a stopper in the top of the container before returning it to the pouch and, with help from the knight, returning to her seat upon the horse. "Let us be off."

"Aye."

"RAAAGH!"

A sickening crack rang out as Falchion shattered part of a Risen's body along with the axe it held. It'd barely had time to begin melting away before it hit the ground.

"What manner of sword is that do that kind of damage?!" Felix exclaimed, yanking his blade out of a Risen's torso.

"That wasn't the sword." Chrom answered. "It's just how I fight."

The blue haired tactician stared at the prince with a look somewhere between confusion and abject horror.

"...What's wrong?"

"...I..." Felix shook his head. "Nevermind. There's more pressing concerns at the moment."

Chrom nodded sharply as the two turned towards the Risen. "Right."

"Heh, feels like the business end of my lance is ME!" Sully laughed as another Risen fell under her attacks.

"Certainly seems that way." Solna noted mirthfully as she surveyed the battlefield. "...And it seems felling Risen has another benefit to it."

"What's that?"

The lavender-haired woman pointed towards the ground. "Their weapons don't disappear with them."

"Heh, handy. Not like they're gonna need 'em now anyways, right?"

"Exactly."

Sully glanced around the fight for a moment, her gaze lingering on Vaike and Virion. "...And it looks like Ruffles, and Smoke Manmuscle are handling things alright."

"...'Smoke Manmuscle'?"

"I first met Vaike as he was staggering out of the smoke from one of Miriel's experiments gone awry." she said with a laugh. "I thought the gods had sent me a gift! Turns out it was just an idiot."

A short giggle escaped Solna before she sheathed her sword and took out her tome. "You'll have to tell me the whole story with that after this fight is over."

As the two women returned to maiming their enemy, a feral shout split the air before an iron axe split a Risen from head to toe, the axe's wielder standing up with a confident grin.

"Class dismissed." He scoffed, an arrow sailing past his head and puncturing the skull on a different creature. "Detention, though? That's just getting started."

"Indeed. Such poorly behaved students require discipline." agreed Virion as he knocked another

arrow.

"And YOU look like you're bleeding, so hold still a second!"

The archer turned his head to see Lissa pointing her healing staff at him from the safety of Stahl's horse as the knight watched for approaching enemies.

"Ah, many thanks milady." he said, a small smile on his face as his wound was mended. "It seems I am more popular than I realized."

"Yeah yeah, just be more careful." scoffed the blonde. "Alright Stahl, let's go!"

With a nod, he spurred his horse forward, liberating a Risen's head from its shoulders as they rushed into the fray.

"RYARGH!"

"Looks like we found another 'chief'..." noted Felix, tome in hand as the large Risen strode towards them, axe in hand.

"This one might be trouble..." Chrom observed, oblivious to Kellam standing not five paces behind him. "But we should be able to conquer it together."

Arcane glyphs appeared in the air around the Tactician. "Most likely, but it seems our friend isn't as keen on waiting for us to come to him!"

A flying axe narrowly missed Chrom's head and was summarily smacked aside by Kellam, barely even scratching his shield. The Ylissian prince rushed towards the Risen with a battle cry, but found his foe to not be one easily dispatched.

"Kellam, hit that Risen from the side while it's distracted!" shouted Felix, trying to get a good line of sight to hit the Chieftain without risk of striking Chrom. "And see if you can get Chrom to stand aside long enough for me to cast a spell!"

The tactician swore he felt an electric charge in the air as the orange knight suddenly rushed past him, armor gleaming in the sunlight.

"This is my big moment...!" he exclaimed, letting loose a war cry as he entered the fray, catching the Risen's axe with his shield and ramming his lance through its chest. "Felix, now!"

Chrom staggered back out of the way, confused at the sudden appearance of the armored juggernaut before another voice drew his attention.

"Strike while the iron's hot!" Felix shouted, a blast of flame surging forward at his command and summarily burning away part of the Risen chief's upper body.

The abomination slumped to the ground and melted into nothing, the only traces being the few throwing axes it had now scattered about.

"The enemy has been routed, milord." reported Frederick as his horse came to a stop a short ways away. "Though it seems they do not take their weapons with them, so a few of the men have set about gathering them as a precaution."

"Very well, and good riddance to these monsters!" exclaimed the prince. "Though it concerns me that they've appeared this far up the Northroad..."

"Unfortunately, it means no path is safe. We'll need to stay wary."

Chrom nodded. "Right, but..." he turned towards Kellam. "When did you arrive, Kellam?!"

The knight's posture slumped slightly. "...I left with everyone else..."

"...You have?! But... I didn't see you until you struck that Risen...!"

Felix stared at the sapphire haired swordsman. "HOW?! He's wearing as much armor as Frederick and his horse combined!"

"That is a question I have oft wondered myself." said Miriel as she carefully slid off the horse. "Kellam has a peculiar talent for hiding in plain sight, even in defiance simple logic."

"...I AM still a Shepherd, right?" Kellam asked nervously. "It's quite an honor, and I'd hate to lose it..."

Chrom frantically waved his hands back and forth. "O-of course you are, Kellam! Forgive me, it's just... you're so quiet all the time I tend to lose track of you!"

"He sticks out like a sore thumb!" Solna protested as she arrived with the group that'd stuck closer to her. "Even if he's standing around doing nothing, he's wearing bright orange armor!"

"And yet I observed only a single Risen taking notice of him in the battle until he struck at their leader." stated Frederick. "I haven't the foggiest how he does it, but having someone capable of ambushing the enemy at potentially any time is quite helpful."

The orange knight laughed nervously. "I-I just try to remember what you taught me, Sir Frederick."

"Wait, you knew he was here, too?!"

"Of course." replied Frederick. "Even if there are times he escapes my watchful gaze, I take the chance to improve my skills."

"Chrom, over here!"

The call of his sister drew the Prince's attention away, and he briskly walked over to where she was shouting from.

"What is it, Lissa?"

"Look!" She said, indicating something a short ways away from her. "It's a pegasus!"

Chrom hummed curiously. "What's one doing here...? Although... it looks like it might be hurt. Let's have a look..."

Despite his cautious approach, the pegasus reared back and whinnied loudly, trying to get Chrom to stay away.

"Whoa! Down, girl! Easy there!"

"Captain, one moment!"

The instant Chrom turned his head to see who'd spoke to him was the same instant that Sumia tripped over nothing and faceplanted in the dirt.

"Sumia, are you alright?!" he asked, moving over to help her stand. "Those boots of yours again?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "I mean, yes! I mean..." She sighed and shook her head. "Nevermind..."

"Well, this time it was a blessing." said Chrom as he helped her up. "The beast is crazed, and I would have you go no closer."

Sumia shook her head. "It's okay, Captain. I can handle this." Stepping past Chrom, the brunette carefully approached the pegasus. "Shhh... easy now, girl. I won't hurt you..."

The small crowd watching the events transpire stared with silent awe as the pegasus calmed enough that Sumia was able to gently stroke the side of its neck.

"...I know that pegasus are calmer around women than men, but that as something else entirely..." said Lissa. "That's incredible, Sumia!"

"I've never seen anything like it..."

"Oh, um... it's nothing really." Sumia said, a small blush on her cheeks. "I just have a way with animals, I guess..."

"I should say so!"

The brunette carefully inspected the pegasus, frowning once she reached its side. "Oh dear... you were right, the poor thing is hurt. Not badly, but... there's no doubt she's in pain."

"Should we make time to wait while you dress the wounds?" asked Chrom.

Sumia shook her head. "No, I'd only need a few things to help her. Once I dress her wounds and let her rest, we should be able to catch up to you quickly."

"Do you mean to ride that pegasus?" asked Solna.

"I do. In truth, I was supposed to begin more formal training with the Ylissian Pegasus Knights today. At the very least, I know how to ride without injuring her or myself in the process."

"Alright, just lemme get what ya need!" said Sully. "That way you can get started before we start marching."

"Thank you, Sully."

"Right. Once you've started, we'll be underway again." said Chrom. "Be safe until you catch up again, Sumia."

The brunette bowed politely. "As you command, sir."

Khan you fight the good fight?

'Well, I never thought I'd find something that would make Solna so … docile."

Felix turned his head at the sound of Frederick's voice, giving his sister a sympathetic look through the falling snow. Ever since they had crossed through a small mountain range earlier in the week that served as a partial marker between Ylisse and Regna Ferox and hit snow, Solna had turned into a quiet ball of misery on the back of Sully's horse. Her coat was buttoned up fully, and the massive mane of lavender waves had been let down to give her head and neck some more cover.

"She's … never liked the cold." Felix admitted weakly, giving a shrug. "I don't think she'll be doing much movement until we get her indoors." Stretching, Felix noticed Lissa wasn't much better off, shivering beneath a cloak as she tried to keep close to her brother as a sort of shield from the cold wind. The prince himself seemed relatively unfazed by the cold, but he did squint to peer through the falling snow.

"F-f-Frebberick …!" Lissa finally whined, looking up at the knight. "I – I'm cold …." Frederick looked at the princess with a chuckle, patting his warhorse's armor-clad withers.

"Walk alongside my horse, milady – she'll shield you from the wind." He reassured her, watching as she scrambled to the opposite side of the large mare. One he was certain that the princess wasn't as bothered by the wind chill, the brunet lifted his head and looked around at rest of the company. Barring the dark violet lump that was Solna, the rest of the company wore cloaks and hoods against the cold and the snow. Apart from Felix, who seemed completely fine in just his coat – even if he had raised the hood when the wind picked up.

Chrom took notice of this too, looking at the other blue-haired male. "Aren't you cold, Felix? That coat doesn't look particularly thick." He asked, reaching out to pat his friend's shoulder. When he did, however, he blinked – Felix felt warmer than expected, even with the sharp wind around them. "...? Why do you feel like you've got a bonfire going underneath your coat?"

"He's a stupid fire lizard." Solna's voice groaned out from behind her lavender hair, making Sully and Stahl turn in their saddles to look at her. Nobody else seemed to have heard her, however, as Felix just responded to Chrom's question with a shrug. When Solna didn't continue her statement, the cavaliers looked at one another with a shrug.

"That's the first time I heard her talk in a while – thought she fell asleep." Sully commented, looking behind herself and skyward. "And I hope Sumia can catch up to us alright – pegasi don't seem to mind the cold so much, but it can be an arse to fly through snow if you're not used to it." Stahl looked in the same direction, holding a hand up to shield his eyes from the faint sunlight that managed to come through the clouds.

"Sumia's a smart girl, though – if she doesn't think she can fly in this weather, chances are she'll head back to the garrison." He reassured his friend after a moment with a smile. "She's never been much of a risk taker – probably flying a bit slower to make sure she doesn't worsen the pegasus's injuries too, knowing her."

"Yeah, that sounds like a Sumia thing." Sully chuckled, smiling as she prodded Solna. The tactician growled and squirmed a bit, one russet eye appearing briefly from underneath the mane of hair. "Just makin' sure you're still alive, is all. You're actin like a wyvern up here in this cold." Solna muttered something unintelligible under her breath, making Sully laugh. "Okay, if you've got enough fire in your belly to call me that, then you're fine."

Stahl just shook his head in amusement, eyes focusing up ahead. "Huh, looks like we're here, at any rate. I'm sure we can drop her off in front of a fire with a meat pie of some sort to get her back to normal. I probably have a couple of the ones Rosie made left." He said with a grin, just as Felix let out a noise of pure shock.

"What in the name of all the gods *is* this structure?!"

In front of the Sheperds, visible through the falling snow, was a massive stone wall. The stones were wedged tightly together, and what little of the masonry was visible showed constant maintenance – Felix doubted a mouse could find a route through it. It was impossibly tall as well, far larger than Felix himself considered necessary – it struck him as trying to keep something on either side of the wall from crossing it, but surely nothing in existence was *this large …!* The part of it they were approaching had a gate cut into it, and the top of the wall had a sort of building built on top of it, potentially a way point. A glance to his left and right showed that the wall extended as far as he could see in both directions, various way points in both directions.

Chrom just chuckled, looking at the wall in front of them as well. "This is the Longfort, and it stretches along the proper border between Ylisse and Regna Ferox – most of the villagers along the Northroad just associate the mountain pass with the border." Looking it up and down, the prince let out a sigh. "It doesn't seem like they're expecting much good news, though."

"The Khans that rule this land have grown weary of foreigners as of late." Frederick said as he gave a tug on his mount's reins. When the large mare stopped, he frowned. "It is fully possible that they've had brigand troubles themselves, however, so don't mistake a lack of hospitality for open hostility. A simple show of diplomacy is what is needed here."

Felix nodded in understanding. "I hate to say it, but perhaps its for the best that Solna's not at her most cognitive – she might just get us into more trouble." Chrom let out a laugh as well, holding a hand up to let the other Sheperds know to stop.

"I can sympathize – diplomacy isn't my strong point either, but ..." Sighing, the sapphire-haired male gave the wall a stern look as he gripped Falchion's hilt, as if in reassurance, "I can't let Emm down. I'll have to try, for my sister's sake." With that, he stepped forward, Frederick at his right. Felix paused for a moment before stepping up on the prince's left, glancing around – even for such a snowy field, it was too quiet. A glance behind him showed Solna sitting up a bit more on Sully's horse, trying to force her sluggish body to work with her.

Then, from atop the parapet, came a voice.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

It was sharp, and strong enough to carry over the whipping winds and snow. Felix thought it was feminine in tone, which made him blink – he hadn't expected that, for some reason. Chrom, to his credit, didn't seem as bothered, opting instead to tighten the grip he had on Falchion's hilt as he cleared his throat.

"In the name of House Ylisse, I seek an audience with the Khans!" He called back, keeping his gaze trained on the parapet where they had heard the voice come from. When no response came, he frowned, and went to take a step forward when the voice came back.

"Halt, you overbold lad! I've lancers at the ready if you take one step more!"

Frederick frowned at that, tightening the grip he had on his mare's reins once more. "Hold, Milady!" Felix arched an eyebrow in respect – the knight clearly knew how to project his voice. "We come on behalf of the Exalt Emmeryn, to discuss matters of mutual interest!"

"And what mutual interests would brigands have to speak of with the Khans?" The woman shouted back, making Frederick and Chrom both bristle. "You think you are the first "Ylisseans" to cross our borders? I have the authority to fell such imposters where they stand!"

The faint sound of Solna yelling something made Felix turn – her words were lost on the wind, but there was a lull coming. Chrom and Frederick didn't seem to hear her, however.

"How *dare* you!" Frederick's voice had taken on a tone akin to a sword's edge. "You are in the presence of Prince Chrom, the Exalt's own blood!"

"And *I'm* the queen of Valm! You do realize impersonating royalty is a capital offense, correct?" The sound of clattering armor and weapons followed the woman's statement. "Perhaps we should settle this the Feroxi way – you claim to be the prince of Ylisse? Then prove it on the field of battle."

Chrom gritted his teeth. "Emmeryn wouldn't like this at all ..." He muttered under his breath before turning his face skyward again. "Please, my good lady –"

"CHROM, THEY HAVE DECIDED TO CONCLUDE NEGOTIATIONS!" Solna's voice finally carried, making Felix and Frederick both whirl around in shock. Despite the cold, Solna had stood up on the back of Sully's horse, shocking both the knight, her mount and the Sheperds near her. "FELIX, GET PRINCE FASHION DISASTER OUT OF THERE BEFORE HE G-!"

"I've heard enough! Lancers, Sentinels! Loose!" The commander's voice drowned hers out, and Felix was faintly aware of the sound of javelins whistling through the air before something fast and white shot past him and Frederick, scooping Chrom up and away. Not a second later, three javelins skewered the snow where the prince had once stood. The snow was empty, making Felix and Frederick look around frantically. It took the sight of falling feathers to make both of them look up.

In the background, Sully laughed and let out a cheer, unaware that Solna had fallen off of her horse from the shock of it all. "That's my girl, Sumia! Hell of a save!"

Up above, Chrom shook his head, the sharp wind and snow hitting his face. He wasn't dead …? He'd barely had time to lift his arms over his head when the javelins had been thrown, and he really doubted the Khans would let inept lancers on the wall. So how had he ….? the feeling of brown waves hitting his face made him look up, gaining his bearings – he sat behind Sumia, who steered the flying horse with a steady hand.

"Sumia …?" He finally managed to force out, staring as he looked around. They had gotten out of javelin range, at the least, but the wind was harsher and colder up here.

"Better hold on tight Captain – could get bumpy." Sumia spoke without turning around in the saddle, somehow enduring the cold despite wearing nothing more than the standard Pegasus Knights did. Nodding in response to her statement, Chrom gripped onto the saddle in front of him with one hand, looking down – he could see Kellam lifting a black and violet bundle out of the snow down below, and the rest of the group was gearing up.

"We should rendezvous with them down below, Sumia, but ..." He looked at the pegasus, "is this really the same, ornery creature we met on the road here?"

Sumia giggled, looking over her shoulder at him as she shifted the lance Sully had given her earlier into a ready grip. "Aww, she's a sweetheart, Captain." She smiled, making Chrom stare in shock for a few moments. "I'm just glad the two of us caught up in time!"

Taking a second to recover himself, Chrom nodded and gave a weak laugh. "That goes double for me, Sumia!" He nodded, glancing towards the spot where the javelins had come from. There seemed to be more getting ready to launch an assault, prompting the blue-haired prince into nodding down at their group. "Come on, let's swing down real fast to see if Felix has any ideas of what to do – we seem to be settling this the Feroxi way, whether we like it or not."

"Right!" Nodding her head as she faced forward once more, Sumia directed the pegasus into a dive. The winged horse came to a halt beside Frederick's horse, out of range of the lancers on the wall. Chrom shifted, standing up as much as he could on the horse to look for Felix. The ice-haired male was helping arrange his sister on Frederick's horse. "I take it she's out for a while."

"Unless she heats up again, yes." Felix nodded, frowning. "We should go and take out their commander first – I wager it would be safe to bet that, if we get her, the others will stand down and listen to sense." Giving both Chrom and Sumia a look over, he nodded. "You two should stick together, provided your pegasus doesn't protest the extra weight."

Sumia shook her head. "Oh, no, it's not a problem!" She replied, cheeks pink – if it was the cold or something else, Felix couldn't tell. "Phila said there's been plenty of times where the pegasus knights have doubled up with a mage or archer on patrol before; the captain's fine."

"Plus, it'll help keep archers off of her." Stahl spoke up as he rode closer, pulling Lissa onto the back of his horse once more – a look showed that Miriel had jumped onto the back of Sully's horse, while Virion and Vaike stood nearby. "Fliers don't like arrows, if I recall?"

"No, not at all – we'll have to get them first." Sumia nodded, tightening the grip on the reins once more before turning to Chrom. "Think you can cover my back, Captain?"

Chrom gave her the most confident smile Felix had ever seen. "Not a problem – I'll do my best to help you out in general too. Guess it's time for your first field job as a Sheperd, then!" Sumia seemed to think on that for a moment, nervous, but a proud smile crossed her face a moment later. The prince gave her one in return. "So, let's show how it's done, Sumia!"

"Here goes!" Nodding her head in agreement, Sumia dug her heels into the pegasus's sides. On cue, the white creature took off soaring once more, circling around to gain more altitude before flying off along the wall, out of bow range. Felix watched them for a few seconds to make sure they would fare well enough before turning back to Solna. Frederick had gotten the drenched coat off of her, having replaced it with a spare wool cloak.

"She'll be fine on my horse, Felix." The large knight nodded, frowning as he tightened the cloak. "We best make haste and get her out of this cold, however – it wouldn't do for her to catch sick."

"If I may?" Miriel and Sully had ridden up, the mage holding her fire tome open. Reaching out, she placed a hand wrapped in red light on the cloak, and held it there for a moment. "Wonderful – I had hoped to see if it would be possible for one to place a small influx of fire magic into a conductor to heat it. One must be cautious over the risk of putting too much fire into the cloak, but at the least, she should not be in danger of hypothermic shock."

"Good to know." Sully nodded before glancing at Felix. "So, what's the plan?"

Felix looked up at the Longfort at that, brow furrowed – it was hard to spot Sumia's pegasus in the falling snow, but the soldiers who had come down from the fort were readily tromping towards them. "We should knock some sense into these guys – don't kill anyone if you can help it, though. It would be a bad first impression to the Khan if we killed some of their men when we're supposed to be here on a peaceful mission."

"So bonk 'em on the head and make em stop?" Vaike let out a laugh, shouldering his axe. "Leave it to the Vaike – I'll hit them so hard they'll be seeing stars." Virion chuckled as well, stringing his bow.

"Do not fear for his head – if any tries to shoot him, I shall simply shoot the arrows out of the way, for I am – "

"The 'archest of archers', we know." Sully cut him off with a roll of her eyes. "Just keep yourselves in one piece, alright?" Virion saluted the redheaded cavalier before following Vaike off to greet the charging soldiers, making her shake her head in exasperation. "And where do you want Miriel and I to go, Felix?"

"You two follow Frederick and make sure nobody blindsides him, and Stahl, Lissa, Kellam and I will go in the same direction as Vaike and Virion." The tactician nodded. "Sumia and Chrom seem to be over in the area over there, so the lot of us just need to cover them until we can get at the commander for the force. Once we've knocked some sense into her head, we should be able to smooth things over again. We clear?" Relaxing a fraction when he received several nods in reply, the cobalt-haired man grinned. "Alright, let's move out!"

Frederick wasted no time in breaking off in the direction Felix indicated, drawing a sword that he had picked up from the fallen Risen. Sully and Miriel were beside him a moment later, the two women ready to fight as well. Solna had regained enough sense to grab at the barding on Frederick's horse, helping her stay in one place as the knight swung around in the saddle to parry an attacker's sword. Sully had managed to catch an archer off guard, hooking her lance through the man's bow before yanking it from his grip.

Behind her, Miriel sat on the horse, keeping her eyes fixed on the enemies. Her tome was in her hand at the ready when an archer further away leveled a crossbow, earning a frown as the mage focused on the weapon in his hand. "Desist at once!" the shout was accompanied by a burst of fire, the spell catching the quarrel that had been fired at Sully and burning it to a crisp before hitting the weapon proper.

The archer let out a frightened yelp and dropped it into the snow, the noise distracting a third archer long enough for Sumia to dive down from above and render him unconscious with the spear she carried. Her face and arms showed cuts from where she had been weaving amongst arrows, but the pegasus was unharmed. Behind her, Chrom stood on the horse again, watching the swordsman that was currently engaged with Frederick.

Spotting the ring of keys hanging from the man's belt, he grinned. "The doors up ahead are locked – someone grab the keys!" He hollered, bracing himself as Sumia urged her pegasus into the air to avoid being shot from one of the archers further up the wall. Sully whistled at the sight, impressed that he hadn't fallen off, before turning to look at the swordsman he had pointed out. The archer she had disarmed was promptly hit over the head by Miriel's tome, and Sully attempted to hook the key ring off of the attacker's belt.

He seemed savvy to it, however, and disengaged from Frederick to turn on her instead. Sword met lance, and the man pressed the attack hard enough to keep Sully from getting an opening.

"Yoink!"

It seemed, however, that Solna had enough energy to pitch in.

Sully, Miriel, and the swordsmen looked at Solna – the woman was giving htem a sleepy grin from beneath the cloak's hood, Frederick holding her around the waist to keep her from toppling off of his horse. Grinning more, the female tactician sat back up, and Sully whapped the

swordsman upside the head with her weapon's haft while he was distracted.

The man dropped like a brick, making her snort. "Damn nuisance," she muttered, glancing at the stairwell that stood nearby. Sumia and Chrom were hovering in the air nearby, diving in and out of danger to harass and disarm the lancers they could get to. "Well, Commander, should we go and open the door for them?" She jerked her thumb at the stairwell. "Captain Chrom said the stairs at the top there were locked, but since we have keys ..."

Frederick nodded, making certain Solna wasn't going to fall into the snow again. "I'll lead, since it seems my passenger was able to grab the keys so … efficiently." Solna didn't seem to pay him much heed, instead opting to sneeze into her arm. "Keep anyone who might try to sneak up on us from behind under control, and we'll clear the way for Milord and Sumia." Sully and Miriel nodded, prompting Frederick to nudge his horse into a canter up the steps. "Here's hoping the force on the other side fares well."

"I *love* this part!"

Felix watched in surprise as Stahl bowled over an attacking archer with the flat of his sword, catching the bow and flinging it to a large snow bank a small distance away. "... And here I thought he'd be one of the calmer fighters here ..." He commented under his breath, ducking beneath a thrown javelin. Kellam just chuckled from his spot nearby, starting to sneak up on a nearby archer that was taking aim at Lissa.

Like with the Risen on the road there, the archer took no notice of Kellam, and let out a frightened shout when the large man had grabbed his bow and yanked it out of his hands. Taking the opportunity to attack with impunity, Felix pulled out the fire tome he had grabbed before leaving Ylisse, and targeted the soldier who had decided to harass Virion.

"Wrong move!" He hollered, a burst of flame flying from his outstretched hand. While the spell missed hitting either Virion or the soldier, the light and heat from the flames was enough to shock the man into backing up and dropping his javelin. He was summarily hit upside the head by Lissa's heal staff as Stahl rode by, while Vaike opted to smash a second archer's bow straight out of his hands.

"I found keys!" Kellam reappeared at Felix's side, dangling the ring in his hands. Behind him, the archer let out a shocked noise – he seemed to have missed the large knight taking them off of his person. His expression was so comical, Felix found himself laughing as he hit the man with a closed fire tome.

"Nice – I didn't even think to look for those." Nodding, the tactician darted forward in time to watch Virion shoot a second archer's shot out of the air. "Well, you certainly don't sell your skills short." Felix arched an eyebrow, earning himself a grin from the archer as he knocked another arrow. "Come to think of it, you … don't seem to be from around here, are you?"

"Yes, yes, but pleasantries can wait until after we've finished giving the rest of these ruffians some lessons." Virion waved the question off with a chuckle, turning and knocking an arrow aimed at Vaike askew. "Do not worry yourself, Sir Felix, I have no intent of betraying our lovely group of friends."

"I never assumed that, but it's nice to hear ..." Tapering off, Felix shook his head as Vaike and Kellam both approached. Stahl and Lissa joined them a second later, the blonde checking for any injuries that needed healing. "As it is, it'll probably be best if we headed up those stairs, and soon – I have a feeling these guys were just the start of what we're gonna have to deal with, and who knows if the other group's headed up the stairs yet."

"Right." Lissa agreed, having finished taking care of any scratches those who had been fighting had taken. "Let's hurry up and make sure my brother isn't in over his head!" Felix nodded in tandem with that, darting towards the stairs. Kellam was right behind him, and Stahl darted ahead while Vaike and Virion brought up the rear. A few seconds later saw a mage hiding the stairs getting hit in the stomach with Lissa's staff to wind him, making the man groan and fall to one side. Felix couldn't help but wince, dropping a vulneary for the man.

'Perhaps hitting things extra hard is just a family thing …' Shaking his head as the thought ran through his brain, Felix braced himself as Kellam unlocked the door, Fire tome at the ready. When the door was shoved open, they found themselves face to face with an armored knight, their spear at the ready. Letting out a surprised noise, Felix let the fire magic fly – he overshot, but the blaze of heat and light was enough to stun the attacker long enough for Kellam to barrel into them. Both fell to the ground in a loud clamor, Kellam slowly staggering to his feet as Vaike and Virion jumped over the downed Feroxi knight.

A look to his right showed Felix that the other half had arrived safely – Sully and Miriel were distracting a man with a large war hammer, the grey gelding they rode on nimble enough to make the foot soldier's attacks fly wide. The horse seemed to grow bored after a moment, snorting and lashing out with a kick to hammer-man's gut that made Felix flinch and look away. Judging from the clanging of metal on stone, it had made him drop the hammer, at the least.

Frederick was right behind them, seemingly taking the message of disarming over maiming the Feroxi soldiers to heart – he had cornered an archer, his mare lunging at the bowmen whenever he tried to fire. A glance skyward revealed why – Sumia and Chrom were flying in low, heading towards a woman in full plate armor. From the way she stood in front of the doorway into the parapet proper, barking orders, the tactician wagered she was in charge.

The fact that her response to Chrom leaping off of Sumia's pegasus, Falchion at the ready, was to simply bring up her shield to block only reenforced the idea.

Chrom didn't seem discouraged by the block, flipping away and holding the legendary sword at the ready. A dent had appeared in the woman's shield, but she paid it no heed as she thrust her javelin forward. Jumping backwards, Chrom darted to the side not blocked by the shield, hitting a part of the woman's arm not covered in as much armor with the flat of Falchion's blade.

Dropping her javelin with a shout, the knight seemed prepared to ram into Chrom with her shield when the prince pointed his sword at her throat. Felix couldn't tell if it was a good look at the sword itself that made her stop dead in her tracks or the fact that she was being held at sword point. Chrom lowered the blade a mere fraction, keeping eye contact.

"Do you believe my word now?" He questioned, allowing a wry grin to cross his face. "Even though I do have to admit it was interesting settling things the Feroxi way."

Felix swore he could see the gears in the woman's brain working, and she stepped back a moment later before giving Chrom a bow at the waist. "A thousand apologies, sire!" Her manner changed at what felt like the drop of the hat, the expression on her face serious. "We have indeed had Plegian bandits claiming to be Ylissean royalty coming to the Longfort too often in these past few weeks, but none could wage a battle so well as you did. Or, I suppose more tellingly, use Falchion quite as well as you demonstrated."

A laugh left Chrom as he sheathed the blade, the knight commander barking orders at the remaining Feroxi warriors to stand down. "It's alright – I can understand such paranoia in times like these," He replied, nodding. "At the very least, I appreciate your decision to go with your instincts, Commander ..."

"Raimi," The woman introduced herself, standing at attention once her men had lowered their weapons. "If you will bring your men inside the Longfort, I will send word of your arrival to the capital. In apology for my actions, I'll also lead the escort personally."

"That would be much appreciated," Chrom nodded, giving a worried glance at Solna as Frederick approached them. The lavender-haired woman seemed more active, but the prince was worried. "If one of my tacticians could accompany you? She doesn't seem to take to the cold well." Raimi focused her eyes on Solna as she tumbled out of the saddle, standing on shaky feet.

"I've seen wyverns react to the cold better than this young lass." She commented, striding forward and gripping Solna's upper arm. "Don't worry, my healers will see to her at once." Turning, the blonde shouted a few more orders at her men, eventually towing Solna into the large building. Worried, Felix followed after the two, missing the words Chrom and Frederick exchanged while they waited for the others to assemble.

"Solna, you sure you're okay?" He asked, pulling up alongside Raimi. The blonde knight jerked in surprise, but Solna merely gave a weak wave of her hand.

"Not all of us have fire in the belly, Felix." She chuckled, voice showing a strange level of exhaustion. "Get me in front of a fire with something to drink and hot food, and I'll recover. But gods, if I had realized just how cold Regna Ferox was ..."

"Hah, do not feel bad for hating the cold of these lands," Raimi spoke up, giving the other woman a wry smile. "These lands were home to the Ymirkin, several thousand years ago – it's an old wives tale that their souls still wrack the lands with this bitter cold." Felix blinked at that, tilting his head to one side.

"Ymirkin?"

"Ice manaketes, Felix." Chrom spoke up, having caught up with the three. Seeing the confused looks both tacticians were giving him, he smiled and shrugged. "They're dragonkin, but … that's about all I can tell you. Manaketes are seldom seen, as far as a race goes, but the most commonly known ones are those related to Naga."

"I thought Naga was a god." Solna countered, sneezing in mid-sentence.

"After the events that led to the first Exalt allying with Naga to destroy the Fell Dragon, she has been revered as a god." Chrom replied, letting out a sigh and scratching one side of his head. "The whole thing is confusing, but to be fair, I never did pay much attention to the details of it when I had my history lessons ..."

"There was a scholar here, a few months past," Raimi supplied as they reached a large central room. Felix and Chrom both gave her a curious look, but she held up a hand as she cast a glance around. "Hannah! I have someone here with need of care – one of our visitors is not suited for our climate." The blonde knight's shouting drew a young woman out, an unusual staff clenched in her hands. Giving Solna over to her, she nodded. "Get her dry clothes and warm food – it would reflect poorly if we let a messenger from Ylisse freeze."

Solna let out another sneeze, as if punctuating the point. "Gods, I wonder if this is what wyverns feel like in the cold ..." She muttered, earning a laugh from the healer as she was lead off to one side. Felix watched them until they went into a side corridor before turning back to Raimi.

"But what was this about a scholar?" He asked, curiosity filling him. "What would a scholar have to do with Naga …?"

"He was here on a research trip, studying the dragonkin and everything related to them."the knight resumed her explanation, chuckling. "If he was still in the area, I would have fetched him for you – it would have been possible for him to explain Naga's role, I wager."

Felix let out a small sigh, shaking his head. "A shame – he sounded like an interesting person to talk to." The tactician tried to imagine what sort of person the scholar would look like, should their paths happen to cross again. All his mind showed him was the rather comical image of Vaike with a long beard in wizard robes, and it was a struggle not to laugh. "Certainly ambitious, if he has plans to record all the information on dragons that he can. A task like that would take a long time, to understate it," he elaborated after seeing the confused look Chrom was giving him."

Raimi merely laughed. "The Khan told him the same thing after giving him directions to the ruins of the ice dragon temple. He merely smiled at her and said he wasn't concerned about the time it would take." Shaking her head, the knight gave Chrom a low bow. "But if I make take my leave, Prince Chrom? I shall go send word to the Khan of your arrival."

Nodding, Chrom watched her leave before turning to Felix. "That worked out well, at least – Everyone got out of there unscathed, too." A relieved sigh left the prince, and he looked around. "I hope that everything else goes well from here on out … Emm's probably worried, even if she'd never show it to anyone."

Felix nodded, before giving Chrom a questioning look. "*Emm?"*

"Lissa started it – she was too little to say Emm's full name for the longest time, so it just rubbed off on the both of us." The sapphire-haired male gave a shrug, grinning. "But at the least, we're in – hopefully they'll be willing to work with us in regards to Plegia."

"Considering the fact that they're being harassed by bandits as well, I would say that's not the problem." Felix frowned. "I'm more worried about the Risen ..."

"Bah! It's probably too cold for them to move, undead or not." Scoffing, Chrom laughed weakly as his stomach growled. "For now, let's get some food – I'm starved." Felix laughed and followed his friend, looking out the nearby window. Chrom *did* have a point – Felix was certain that it would take a lot of energy to get the undead to move about in such weather.

At that, his mind remembered something Raimi had mentioned – the ice dragon temple. "I wonder if we could make a pit stop there ..."

To Felix's dismay, the temple Raimi had mentioned was on the opposite side of Regna Ferox, far past where they were headed to meet the Khan's. The cobalt-haired man had pouted for a short while after Raimi had told him such, reading a small tome one of the border guards had given him on the more locally known folk tales of dragons. Something about the manaketes stirred a fascination in his brain, doubtlessly caused by some of the memories that had been lost.

Solna was moderately unhappy as well, even though the route they were taking was sheltered. Someone, with some sort of magical talent or sheer skill, had carved a domed path out of ice, the clear walls blocking the cold wind as they walked. Doors and various other paths branched off at different points, leading to towns and smaller forts along the way. It wasn't anything like what anyone in the troop had seen before, and it wasn't easy for them to hide their awe.

If nothing else, the sight when they reached their destination was enough to make Felix stare.

A long, stone hall stood before them, a shock of stone grey against the white snow and ice. A lone banner of white, deep blue and red whipped in the air in front of the hall, a pair of hounds' heads

separated by a diagonal line embroidered on it. Several smaller stone houses were around the hall as well, a few resembling garrisons. Very little land seemed to have been farmed, but a deep pine forest spread out to one side, the various greens and browns a splash of color against the cold scenery.

Just beyond the hall, Felix could have sworn he saw the start of a statue, but all he could make out at the distance was a reptilian, frilled head.

Raimi didn't allow much time to stop, directing the group to the large hall. Once inside, she led Chrom, Lissa, Frederick and the Twins into the main part of the hall, with the rest of the Sheperds heading towards the mess hall to eat a hot meal and relax. Stopping in a large, spacious room with the banner from outside hanging on a wall, Raimi nodded at the group. "Please, wait here while I summon the Khan." She nodded, leaving silently.

"The Khan is away?" Felix questioned, looking around the room. Solna was wandering about as well – being out of the biting wind seemed to have improved her mood, although she still wore her hair loose.

"Most likely training," Chrom replied with a wry smile. "The khans prefer combat to politics … or I suppose it's more accurate to say that battle *is* their politics."

"I would say they were sensible people for that, but at the same time, they live in this blasted cold." Solna muttered as she walked around, stretching a fraction. "Still, a warrior ruler in a frozen wasteland is oddly fitting."

"I can picture them now," Lissa began, giggling, "A big, broad man who could lift Vaike over his head, carrying a gigantic axe –" The blonde's words were cut off by a deep, feminine laugh.

"Am I now? Go on, please continue! I always appreciate a laugh."

Everyone present started at that, and a dark-skinned woman with blonde hair walked in from a hallway near Solna, her red and white armor glinting in the light of the braziers. Felix was mildly amused to see she was of similar height to his sister, who didn't seem quite as surprised by the newcomer's appearance.

"You're the – I mean, the Khan, I presume?" Chrom caught himself, recovering from his surprise enough to converse. The woman nodded, walking closer with Solna right behind her.

"One of the Khans, yes. Flavia's the name, and I back the apology for the troubles at the border." The now-named Flavia offered Chrom her hand to shake, a gesture the prince returned. "You are welcome in Regna Ferox."

"I'm confident we can put that behind us," Chrom shook his head, a frown spreading across his face, "but is it true that Plegian bandits posing as Ylisseans have been ransacking the border?"

"Aye- we found papers indicating such on one of the captains." Flavia nodded as well, her eyes drifting to the coat Felix still wore. Noticing her glance, Chrom shook his head.

"Felix and his sister are with me – you can trust them." Nodding at Solna, he ground his teeth as he thought about what Flavia had confirmed. "But for them to try and keep tensions between Ferox and Ylisse high … damn them!" A sharp look from Frederick made him shake his head, "I … forgive me, that wasn't delicately put."

"Bah, damn delicacy and damn them too." Flavia let out a loud laugh. "We appreciate plain speak here in Ferox."

"Then have a word with your damn border guards … Or I might just do it for you, and it won't be kind tidings." Solna muttered, shaking her head. Flavia merely laughed more, turning to the female tactician.

"Now that's Feroxi diplomacy!" The other tall woman smiled at her. "Does the prince keep you around for pleasant conversations? Because I have a feeling you'd be a *fun*conversationalist."

Felix groaned. "A second Solna. Joyous." He muttered, keeping it under his breath. "If it weren't for the cold I'd say we should have just sent her here by herself ..."

"Love you too little brother!"

Chrom merely groaned. "I … apologize for my tacticians – they're rather energetic."

"Oh, they're no problem." Flavia grinned more, eyes dancing as she dropped an arm around Solna's shoulder. "I'd be tempted to keep this one here, if you don't mind splitting up the package deal." Solna merely snorted, although she made no effort to move from beneath the other woman's arm.

"You'd have to deal with me griping about the blasted cold." She replied with a shrug.

"Everyone does." Flavia waved her free hand dismissively before focusing back on Chrom, frowning slightly. "I know why you're here, but regrettably, I cannot supply Feroxi troops for Ylisse. I lack the authority."

Lissa was the first to react. "What!?" the smaller blonde shouted, eyes wide.

Shock spread over Chrom's face as well. "But, you're the Khan!"

"**One** of the Khans," Flavia corrected him, shaking her head. "There's two of us – I am the East Khan, so I tend to the Ylissean border and the trade routes there, while the West Khan handles the border with Plegia and the seaports to Valm. Every few years, the Khans hold a tournament, and the winner gains political sovereignty over both kingdoms."

"I assume that you mean things such as military protocol, along with forging alliances?" Frederick spoke up, making Flavia turn to him.

"Exactly – The West Khan won the last tournament, and so ..."

"So we will receive no aid at all?" Felix turned to Chrom at that, not liking how disappointed his friend sounded. Both Flavia and Solna scowled at him.

"Chrom, I *highly* doubt Flavia would be so rude to send us home empty-handed." She pointed out. "At the least, she'd try to put a word in with the West-Khan, I assume?" Sending a questioning glance at the woman who still had an arm draped over her shoulders, Solna grinned when Flavia nodded.

"Better than that – the next tournament is nigh, and I am in need of champions." The female Khan said with a grin, earning a confused look from everyone but Solna, whose russet eyes brightened.

"Again, you people are *incredibly* practical – barring your choice of scenery, of course." She commented, earning a laugh from Flavia.

Chrom just gave Solna a confused look. "... What does the tournament have to do with us, Solna …?" Beside him, Felix's eyes widened as he looked at the two, snapping his fingers.

"... You want us to fight for you, don't you?" He asked, earning a feral grin in response.

"I would assume that Ylisseans held no place in Feroxi politics." Chrom countered Felix's statement, giving the two tall women a confused look.

Flavia let out a bark of laughter "On the contrary. The khans themselves do not fight—they choose champions to represent them. Otherwise our land would be rife with blood feuds and dead khans!" Nodding at Lissa, she added, "we don't involve comrades or kin for the same reason. The tradition of champions from outside Ferox representing the Khans in the tournament came about over the centuries, but this would be the first time that it involved foreign royalty … that I know of." Laughing more, Flavia grinned. "Regardless, it is your choice to make."

Frederick gave Chrom a look, making the prince sigh. "There is no choice – my people are desperate. We do not only have to deal with Plegian bandits, but now Risen as well." A confused frown spread across Flavia's face, shooting Solna a questioning look. The female tactician mouthed 'tell you later', making Chrom sigh in relief. "If fighting for you is the quickest way to an alliance, then we will take up our steel."

"I like you, Prince Chrom!" Flavia laughed more. "I do hope you survive the tournament."

"Thank you for that resounding vote of confidence." Felix shook his head, groaning – it was truly like having a second Solna around …

Flavia merely turned her feral grin on Felix. "Well, if he has *two* of you to think out battle strategies, then I have all the confidence in the world!" She countered, violet eyes dancing in amusement. "Rest for now, and I'll lead you to the area where the tourney will be held on the morrow." A frown crossed her face, and she nodded. "Still though, I have my concerns – I hear an swordsman of similar repute to Prince Chrom champions the West Khan this tourney."

Chrom met her look squarely. "They will fall all the same, I can promise that."

The female Khan nodded at him, grinning wryly. "Well spoken again – I can't wait to see how well you do with that blade on the battlefield." She nodded, finally removing her arm from Solna's shoulders. "But for now? Food, ale, and you can let the two tacticians do their jobs – we can talk strategy in the study over our meal."

Felix did not like the way Solna's face lit up at the mention of ale.

Khan Artists

Chapter Notes

[Written by Mags]

"Quite the impressive arena... The Vaike is ready to put on a show!" proclaimed the blonde axeman as the group, lead by Khan Flavia, approached the site where the Khan's Tournament would be held.

"Arenas are common here, but this is the largest in all of Ferox." stated the Khan, a grin on her face. "And right in the middle, too. No better place for the Khans to decide who shall rule."

Chrom hummed as they reached the entrance, the large doors opening the moment the guards caught sight of Flavia. "At least it means the battlefield won't be lacking in capacity..."

"I'd be shocked if they were, truth be told." commented Felix as they entered the arena. "The 'Feroxi way' doesn't seem like it would make a half-hearted effort on anything."

"Haha, well put!"

Frederick rolled his shoulder as he slid off his warhorse and lead it inside. "Do you know anything particular about the 'Champions' the East Khan is sending to represent him?"

"Unless something has changed, it should still be the same man who won him the last tournament." replied Flavia. "I don't recall his name, but I've seldom seen anyone with his talent in swordsmanship."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five years." she stated, pausing in step as someone approached her. "What is it?"

"Khan Flavia, it appears as thought the East Khan has a new champion!" reported the soldier. "I inquired about them and found little – even the guards on the East side of the Arena were shocked to see this masked swordsman."

Virion quizzically arched an eyebrow. "A masked swordsman? How... uninspired."

"And who among us claims to be the 'Archest of Archers'?" quipped Sully. "I don't think you're in a position to judge, Ruffles."

"Is that all?" asked Flavia.

"Aye." answered the guard. "There is little I could glean without breaking rules of the tournament, and I shall not bring such shame upon you, Khan Flavia."

She hummed. "Good. Go back to your post, and keep your eyes open for funny business just in case."

With a sharp nod, the guard hurried off as Flavia let out a heavy sigh.

"I just had to run my mouth about changes, didn't I?"

"At least it's only a masked swordsman and not a dragon." Solna offered.

Flavia chuckled. "I don't know, I think I'd prefer the dragon."

The Shepherds followed Flavia to the ready area, eventually being left to their own devices as they awaited the tournament's official start.

"Oh, this should be fun~! A good chance to stretch my legs, too~!"

Lissa gave Solna a concerned look. "I think you're a bit too excited for this..."

"It's just how she is sometimes." Felix stated, tending to his Levin Sword. "She learned to run before she could walk..."

"...The nature of your amnesia continues to baffle me." said Miriel, having taken to keeping notes in a small journal while the group waited. "And yet it's most fascinating none the less..."

"The world works in mysterious ways, I guess..." Stahl commented as he munched on a piece of bread.

The mage nodded, her eyes still affixed to her notes. "Indeed it does. Perhaps the unraveling of this particular mystery will be but the first step in even greater discoveries."

"...How does helping two people remember stuff make it so you can figure out something else?"

"If not for our limited timeframe, I would gladly explain it do you, Sully."

The red knight laughed. "I'll pass anyways. I like to keep my life simple. Safe the complex stuff for the people who're good at it, y'know?"

"I just hope we get started soon." said Sumia as she stroked the head of her Pegasus. "I don't think the poor girl likes these small corridors..."

As if to answer her prayer, the large doors to the corridor to arena proper opened and a Feroxi soldier stepped through.

"It's time." he said, motioning for the group to follow him.

"...So it begins." sighed Chrom as he stood, turning towards his companions. "Everyone ready?"

The response amounted to a resounding 'yes'.

"Alright. Shepherds, move out!"

The group slowly advanced through the large tunnel, watching a heavy gate open at the far end as the sound of cheering echoed.

"Sounds like quite the crowd." noted Kellam.

"The crowd doesn't matter as much as our opponents do." Felix said. "So keep your eyes peeled for any tricks they might attempt to spring on us."

The knight nodded in response. "Will do."

"Heh... Ol' Teach hasn't schooled some chumps infront of an audience in a long time." Vaike grinned. "Hope they're ready for today's lesson."

"What sort of lesson do you have for them?" quipped Miriel. "One on music, perhaps? I do believe an opus to chaos and pain would be an excellent score to instruct them upon."

The axeman stroked his chin in contemplation. "...What's an 'opus'?"

"A masterpiece." Solna answered. "Like a smith stating a particular lance is their finest work."

Another grin spread across Vaike's face. "Heheh... I like the sound of that."

"I'll admit, so do I." chuckled Felix, glancing at his sister. "How's the balance on that?"

Solna moved the axe she'd taken from the supplied weapons off her shoulder and held it in front of her. "Good enough that it won't throw me off."

"Y'know, I didn't really peg you for the type to use an axe." commented Sully as she adjusted her grip on her lance. "Seemed more the lancer type to me... well, aside from the magic-y stuff you were doin' with that tome."

"I was of similar thought." Frederick added.

A giggle escaped the lavender-haired tactician. "I enjoy womanly things from time to time. Light reading, puppies, bear meat, lace, battle axes, lacy battle axes... the usual sort."

"...Hey Felix, do you know how to make a lacy battle axe?"

"Lissa..."

The princess stuck out her tongue at her brother. "I'm kidding!"

"No, you're not. I know that tone."

Lissa huffed, crossing her arms as the Shepherds crossed the threshold into the battlefield proper, the crowd cheering as they emerged from the tunnel. Her discontentment didn't last for very long, however.

"Chrom, look!" she exclaimed, pointing at the person standing closer to the center of the arena.

The Ylissian prince bristled, hand gripping the handle of Falchion as he caught sight of the 'masked swordsman' that was the champion of the East Khan. It was none other than the so-called 'Marth' they had met in the forest shortly after finding the twins.

"I see him..." Chrom answered, striding forward ahead of the group. "Marth! May I ask of you one question before we begin?"

Marth said nothing, reaching to grasp the handle of their own blade.

The sapphire-haired swordsman scowled. "...Fine, then. Our swords can speak for us!"

Falchion was unsheathed, a determined glare from its wielder piercing the air between himself and his opponent. The younger swordsman drew his sword in turn, taking his stance as the sword entered into a clear light. Several gasps went out between the members of the Shepherds, as none of them could mistake what they were seeing; This Masked Man claiming the Hero King's name held a Falchion of his own.

"Where did you get that?"

Once again, Marth did not respond.

"There's no way..." Chrom muttered, rushing forward a moment later. With a mighty leap, he shot into the air and came down with a spinning slash. Marth parried the attack, and two began to exchange blows in a manner that greatly agitated the blacksmith standing a ways away; clanking their swords against each other like children swinging wooden toys.

"Tell me-" began the Ylissiean prince between breaths. "Who taught you how to fight like that?"

Shoving each other away, the swordsmen swung their blades about in excessive flourish, their every motion mirrored, even down to their surge forward that let them pass by their opponent's sword arm with a loud ring of steel. Upon whirling back around after the lunge, Chrom was able to catch sight of his opponent leaping into the air, descending with an attack identical to the one had used mere minutes before.

"My father!" exclaimed Marth, striking the ground as Chrom darted out of the way to escape the blow before getting back on his feet and pointing his blade at the Ylissiean Prince.

"That's not how-!"

Felix's angry shout of annoyance at the swordplay he was seeing was interrupted by his sister slapping her hand over his mouth and cutting him off with a shout of her own.

"LET THERE BE BRAWL!"

"Yeah, what Solna said!" added Lissa. "Smash 'em, bro!"

Frederick merely sighed as Felix pulled his sister's hand away.

"Questionable display of swordsmanship aside, Marth is still quite gifted with that weapon of theirs." he said, a noticeable edge to his voice. "The men the West-Khan has supplied likewise seem capable..."

"Best mind our distance, then?" asked Solna.

"Aye."

Vaike scoffed, hefting his war hammer. "This'll be no problem. Just leave the guys in the heavy armor to Ol' Teach!"

"You won't get close enough to strike them without support. Miriel, keep an eye on him; those Mages might be a problem."

"Very well." she answered, adjusting her glasses. "I shall endeavor to safeguard him."

"And what of me?" inquired Virion. "Surely you would not advise an archer to stand in the midst of a battlefield alone..."

Solna hummed, looking between the others before smiling. "How good is your aim from horseback?"

"Am I on Ruffles escort duty again?" asked Sully. "Because that I can handle."

"Well, far be it for me to argue wi- HRK!"

The red cavalier had silenced the archer by yanking him up onto the back of her horse. "Just don't fall off, Ruffles."

"I don't know how well I'll be able to do in this battle..." said Sumia. "I can't fly very high in this arena."

"You can still cross the battlefield more quickly than the rest of us." Felix noted. "So it might be best if you kept your focus on keeping Chrom out of trouble... the lack of archers amongst the enemy will make that fairly simple, I wager."

"A-alright!"

Frederick turned his head, offering a hand to Lissa. "I believe it would be wise for you to ride with me in this battle."

The blonde nodded, accepting the assistance in climbing onto the back of Frederick's mount.

"Kellam, you cover Stahl." Solna ordered. "Felix, I think we should stick together on this one."

The blue haired man smiled. "Wind and Fire?"

She smiled back. "Of course."

Stahl and Kellam exchanged concerned looks as Felix slipped his sword into its sheath, pulling a tome of fire magic out in its place.

"Let's begin!"

Within moments, the Arena screamed to life with the roar of the crowd and the sounds of battle. Thunderous gallops rang out as the three Ylissean cavaliers rode around the perimeter of the Arena, arrows flying from Virion's bow to keep the mages off balance as Stahl and Frederick alternated surging across the center of the battlefield, sword and lance swinging in violent arcs to. One of the knights had taken to fighting Vaike, though to his own misfortune as the war hammer smashed the shield out of his hands.

Kellam found himself ambushing another knight as the armored soldier braced herself against one of Stahl's charges, leaving a thick gash across her lance arm and forcing her to retreat as her weapon clattered to the ground. A spell from Miriel disoriented one of the axemen attempting to surprise Vaike, leaving them open a charge and Sully's lance. Chrom disarmed and knocked aside a different fighter, as a Javelin from Sumia pierced the tome of one of the Mages.

The twins, meanwhile, rushed past another knight and fighter, a burst of flame from Felix keeping them at a distance as the two approached Marth. The masked swordsman scowled, readying their blade as the tacticians approached.

"Let us fight with honor. May the best soldier win!" they exclaimed, rushing to meet the duo head on.

Solna's axe swung straight for Marth's shoulder, forcing the man to dodge as best they could due to the sheer speed of the attack.

-Too close...!- he silently cursed as he lashed out in retaliation. -But it explains where he got it...-

The lavender-haired woman managed to parry the attack with the shaft of her axe, but the weapon practically screamed in protest of the blow, causing her eyes to widen. Felix took the chance to

use another fire spell that forced Marth to back off for a moment's time. The swordsman's eyes narrowed behind their mask an instant before they rushed at the blue-haired man, who barely avoided a terrible gash to his shoulder, but the strike left Marth open for a hit straight to the chest from the flat of Solna's axe, sending the man sprawling across the ground and knocking off their mask once they landed.

A quick hand reclaimed the mask and replaced it upon the swordsman's face before he once more turned to face Solna and Felix, now surprised to see the later rushing towards them, Levin Sword in hand. A furious shout accompanied by a crackle of lightning along the blade's edge preceded a flurry of slashes – some more unpracticed than others, but clearly displaying that the man knew his way around a sword better than most. Most were dodged, a few parried at price from the arcing lightning magic, and two struck true; both along Marth's left arm. When the sapphire-haired masked man swung in a wide arc, it gave him a moment's respite by forcing Felix back before the sound of rushing air caught their attention. Solna had taken up a tome of wind and now stood behind her brother casting spells.

"Time to face the music!" exclaimed the lavender-haired tactician, arcane glyphs appearing around her before a surging blast of wind magic tore through the air and slammed into Marth.

He did his best to brace himself with his sword, managing to keep his balance. It proved to be for their benefit, as it allowed them to dodge the follow up attack from Felix and trip him, leaving Solna wide open to a charge.

"You will not stop me!" Marth shouted, an ethereal glow emanating from his blade as he slashed at the woman before him. Despite her best effort, Solna was struck by the blade along her back as she attempted to evade it. She cried out in pain and slammed harshly to the ground.

"SOLNA!"

The masked man quickly stepped aside, intent on avoiding an anger-fueled retaliation from Felix that never came; the blue-haired tactician was more concerned about his sister.

"Face ME!"

Marth barely had the time to spin around and catch Chrom's attack, the prince glaring daggers at his opponent.

"Who is your father?" He asked, his expression unchanging.

"I've said enough for one day."

Chrom scowled, pressing his attack harder only for Marth to push the blade to the side, allowing him to slip past and put the prince between himself and the twins.

"Hmph. Is that how it is?" he asked. "Lissa owes you her life, and for that you have my gratitude, but within these walls, I represent the East-Khan and the interests of Ylisse. I can't promise to stay my blade, but I vow not to shame you."

"Heh, never expected such youthful arrogance..." Marth said under their breath, raising his voice to a shout a moment later. "We shall see who shames who!"

The resounding echos of a furious clash of blades followed, leaving the crowd and the other combatants on the field entranced by the display. The Shepherds, most having disarmed their opponents by now, were in awe of this masked stranger trading blows with their leader... save Lissa, who had rushed to help Felix tend to Solna.

"...Hey, Sully... I'm not the only one seeing this, right?" asked Stahl.

"Nah, I've got a good view myself..." replied the redhead. "Who is that guy?"

Virion hummed. "If I am not mistaken, is that not the man who protected the fair Princess Lissa?"

"What, back at the forest when those Risen things first popped up?"

"Indeed."

Sully frowned, crossing her arms as she thought. "...If I'm remembering what Captain Chrom said on the march after that, yeah it is..."

"Didn't they appear out of nowhere?"

"That's what Felix told me." reported Kellam. "But why're they in Ferox?"

"Hells if I know." griped one of the West-Khan's Mages, frowning at her destroyed Tome. "Lad turned up one day and knocked Khan Basilio's champion flat on his arse!"

Sully looked at the odd brunette mage who'd seated herself beside Kellam. "What, he didn't ask?"

"Khan Basilio's got his quirks. Easily enamored with skilled fighters being one of them." sighed the Mage. "Mask boy barely said a word the whole time he's been here aside from when he spoke with the Khan! In fact..." She pointed up at one part of the crowd. "...The ol' champion up there by the Khan talks more than the lad does!"

A few sets of eyes turned to where the mage had pointed, seeing a tanned skin man cheering loudly while another, lighter skinned man with dark hair stood nearby.

"Is the one cheering is the West-Khan?"

"Aye."

"...Seems like a lively boss you got there." chuckled Sully before she scanned the battlefield.

Marth was the only one of the West-Khan's men still standing with a usable weapon now; the rest had been either knocked unconscious by the Shepherds or had their weapons smashed to pieces... although it seemed one fighter was not dismayed and was now trying to fight Vaike bare handed. Felix and Lissa had gotten Solna on her feet enough to get her away from the clashing blades, leaving the only real action left as Chrom's duel with Marth.

The two swordsmen continued their clash, matching each other blow for blow till the once more locked blades and glared at each other. The fight was not to stay that way for long, however, as the sound of heavy footfalls came from behind the Ylissean prince.

"THAT IS NOT HOW YOU USE A SWORD!" Felix bellowed, lashing out with his Levin Sword as he approached, forcing Marth back to avoid the electrified blade.

It proved to be all the opening Chrom needed to strike a decisive blow at the masked man, sending them slamming to the ground, sword slipping from their grip.

"Impressive..." Marth gasped, trying to catch their breath. "If not surprising..."

The crowd roared to life once more as an official declared that the West-Khan's forces had been defeated, meaning Khan Flavia was now the Ruling Khan of Feroxi... at least, that's what a few people on the battlefield heard. The rest?

"Who taught you to fight like that?!" Felix demanded, shaking Chrom. "That's a disgrace to swordsmanship around the world, and an insult to a blade like Falchion! What is wrong with you?!"

"Whoa, take it easy over there!" Stahl called out, hopping off his horse and trotting over to the prince and the tactician. "Save it for later, Felix!"

"Yes! Please!" agreed Chrom, still swaying back and forth. "And stop shaking me! I'm going to be sick if you don't!"

With a sigh, Felix let go, causing Chrom to stagger in place as the blue-haired blacksmith grumbled under his breath and walked back over to where Lissa and Kellam were helping Solna stand up.

"We should report to Khan Flavia with all due haste, milord." Frederick advised, glancing warily at the twins. "Best to speed along out return to Ylisse."

"Aye... urgh... and tend to any injuries." said the prince, half-staggering towards the Arena's exit. "Gods, he's got a strong grip..."

"Haha! Well fought!" Flavia laughed as the Shepherds entered the audience chamber of the Arena. "You have my respect, Prince Chrom. And, perhaps more to the point, you have your alliance. I will provide Ylisse with the troops she needs."

The prince's eyes lit up in an instant. "Truly? Thank you, East-Khan."

"I should thank you!" She countered with another hearty laugh. "It feels like ages since I've held full power. Come, my new friends! Tonight, we celebrate!"

The dark skinned woman cackled as she strode out of the room, a veritable spring in her step while a larger man walked in, shaking his head, and followed by a dark-haired man with an unusual sword at his belt.

"Bah! Any excuse for a party and Flavia jumps on it..." he sighed, stopping a few paces away from the Shepherds. "So, you lot were her champions this time 'round, huh?"

"I'm sorry, have we met?" asked Chrom.

"I'm the West-Khan you so rudely removed from power!" The man answered. "Name's Basilio, and I'll be damned before I deny you're handy with a sword, boy. I thought fore sure I'd picked the stronger man."

Frederick shifted his posture. "What do you know of our mutual masked associate?"

"You mean that 'Marth'? Bah, just some sellsword with delusions of grandeur." stated Basilio before he gestured to the man beside him. "He turned up one eve and knocked my old champion here flat! It was love at first sight, and I'm generally too old for such things!" A laugh escaped the muscular man. "He's long gone now, though. Must've headed straight for the exit once he scraped his sorry ass up off the arena floor."

A wistful sigh came from Lissa. "He's so dark and mysterious..."

"Sounds like this 'Marth' has himself at least one fan..." Felix quipped. "I'm more liable to hit him with a soup ladle."

"Well, I mean, c'mon... He IS sort of dreamy..." She turned her head. "Isn't he, Solna?"

The lavender haired woman grumbled, fussing with the hasty applied bandages she had around her lower chest and back. "He cut me across my scars, so I don't think he's my type, Lissa..."

"And I think YOU'RE sort of dreaming!" added Chrom.

"Yowch! Lighten up, Big Brother." said Lissa. "I was just kidding."

"Hey Chrom, we stickin' around for that party?" asked Stahl. "I could use a bite to eat about now..."

The prince turned straight towards the Knight who stood beside him.

"...Though I would advise haste in returning to Yisstol, we did leave our effects at the East-Khan's palace." admitted Frederick. "And it would be rude to deny the Khan if she requested our presence. A bountiful meal and a night's rest would not cause due harm."

"There's your answer, Stahl." Chrom chuckled. "We'd best take our leave to return to the East-Khan's palace."

Basilio held up a hand. "Before you go, boy, I have something of a gift for you."

The man standing beside the Khan stepped forward.

"This is Lon'qu, my former champion." began Basilio. "Not much for talking, mind you, but peerless with a sword. Good as Marth in my mind. To be honest, I can't quite figure out how Marth bested him so quickly..."

"So he's the guy who lost?" Lissa asked, stepping towards the former champion. "But he looks really strong..."

Lon'qu slid back a step, a grimace on his face. "Away, woman!"

"Hey! Wh-what did I say?!" exclaimed the princess, jumping back slightly with a start.

"Ba ha ha! Let's just say that ladies tend to put him on edge." Basilio stated. "That aside, he's more than capable on the battlefield. Might even have the makings of a Khan! Consider him part of West Ferox's contribution to the war effort; He's to report to you and anyone else you deem necessary be giving him orders."

Chrom was somewhat taken aback by that. "You're certain about this?"

"Yes, yes. He's your man now."

"And Lon'qu?" asked Chrom, turning towards the swordsman. "You have no objections?"

He shrugged. "He gives orders. I stab people. I think our roles are clear."

"...Alright then. Welcome aboard."

"In which case, I have a question for you."

Lon'qu turned his head to face Felix, a single eyebrow arching inquisitively.

"What make of sword do you prefer?" asked the tactician, having produced a quill and notepad from his coat. "And how sharp?"

A grin tugged at the corners of the swordsman's lips.

"I think I'll enjoy this assignment, Khan Basilio."

"Mmmrgh..."

"That's not an 'I hate the cold' grumble." noted Felix as the Shepherds marched back to the West Ferox Palace, Flavia leading the group with a merry tune upon her lips. "Are you feeling well, Solna?"

The lavender-haired woman grumbled again from her seat on the back of Sully's horse. "My ears and my back hurt..."

"Why do your ears hurt?" Virion inquired. "I wasn't aware you had been struck there..."

"I dunno... but they do..." she wined. "The cold isn't helping, either..."

Lissa frowned, looking at Felix. "Do you have any ideas?"

"None." He admitted, sounding worried. "After you have some food in you, it'd be best if you went straight to bed, Solna."

"Food... food and bed..." hummed Solna. "Yeah... yeah, sounds good..."

Vaike yawned. "Ol' Teach is thinkin' the same thing... that one Feroxi guy kept thinkin' he could out arm-wrestle me and if Chrom hadn't schooled that showoff with the mask when he did, he just might've."

"A feat for the ages, I'm sure..." quipped Miriel.

"I think we-" Felix was cut off with a loud yelp as he slipped, falling face-first into the snow. It took him a moment to stand up, shaking the powder from his cobalt hair and coughing. "What did I step on?!"

Carefully turning around, a faint green marking on the ground caught his attention. Kneeling down, he dug through the snow and discovered something locked in the ice. With a hum, and heedless of the convoy around him stopping, he withdrew his tome of fire from his coat and with a quickly muttered word, melted some of the ice away.

"What's going on?" asked Chrom, striding over to where the tactician was hunched over.

"Felix tripped on something, and I guess he's checking out what it was..." reported Kellam.

Lon'qu scoffed. "Just ice. If the path is traveled enough, it can prove a hazard to the unwary."

"More than ice." Felix stated, standing up with something in his hand. "Well, mostly. I found this under the surface of it..."

He turned around and held out his hand for the others to see.

"...Who drops a jewel in Ferox?" asked Lissa. "Much less loses it long enough for it to get iced over?"

"No fool I've ever heard of." said Flavia, having moved from the front of the group to see what had happened. An inquisitive look came over her face as she saw the gem in Felix's hand.

"...Doesn't look like any jewel I've ever seen. Seems like it might've been broken off something larger, too..." She shrugged. "But I suppose it's yours now. No telling who may have lost their bauble..."

Felix hummed, then tucked it into his pocket. "True enough... sorry for the delay. My curiosity gets the better of me at times."

"Ha! No harm done." laughed the Khan. "Let us resume our journey then, friends! The celebration won't wait all night for us!"

The feast and celebration upon the return to the West Ferox Palace were certainly not lacking, much to the delight of Stahl's appetite and Solna's weary disposition. Merriment was had, tavern songs were sung, and Flavia drank Vaike under the table, much to Miriel and Lissa's amusement. As it all wound down, minor preparations for the morning's march were made by those not having drained more than two pints of ale while a certain lavender-haired woman had a fairly restful night's sleep. The next morning, however... was something of another matter entirely.

Her ear-splitting shriek of confusion upon waking up was just the start of it all.

End Notes

Tori: So um, hey! Tori here, saying that I'll be writing this story in tandem with Mags. You can ask questions of me in the reviews, and I'll do the best to answer them. To clarify, yes, Solna is my ava for Awakening, and I could not tell you where I came up with Solna for a name. I don't even think it's an actual word, but I like it. (also to clarify, Solna's a build 3 fem avatar. They're about the same height as most male units)

Mags has got the next chapter to write, and we've got more or less rough ideas planned out for what happens for the entire story. Including ships! Enjoy this crazy train as we drive it~

Mags: SO YEAH this is a thing I'm doing now! Fire Emblem Awakening! I actually blame Tori mentioning that some blogs she follows on Tumblr drawing their own FE:A Avatar Units inspiring her to do the same, the two of us created this as a semi-joke at first, but as you can see it's an actual story! Felix is my Awakening avatar(Build 2 was used for him in-game if you're curious) in case it wasn't obvious. And NO, I am not giving up on Reshuffled, Golden Moon, or Persona stories in general... I just might be a little distracted at times. Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire coming out won't help matters either. And yes, the original AFNF and stories related to it are officially gone now. I was sick of having them on my profile when they're absolutely god awful.

But yes, THIS CRAZY TRAIN HAS NO BRAKES! Mwehehehe...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!